

キ

ノ

の

旅

XV

the Beautiful World

時雨沢恵

KEIICHI SIGSAWA

イラスト ● 黒星紅白

ILLUSTRATION KUROHAKU KUROBOSHI

電撃文庫

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-the Beautiful World-
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t h e B e a u t i f u l W o r l d

キノの旅 XV

時雨沢恵一

Illustration: 黒星紅白



 電撃文庫

キノの旅XV
the Beautiful World

キノとエルメスは、西に向かって走って
いました。大地がほとんど岩なので、
舗装道路並みに固いです。段差もなく、
どこを走っても道になります。キノは快
適にエルメスを走らせ、そして次に進路を
塞ぐサボテンをゆったりと避けながら、
「もともとは、御匠から聞いた話なんだ」
「じゃあ、結構前の話だね」エルメスが
言って、キノは頷きました。「だね。御匠
はこう言っていた—— “とてもとても美
しい廃墟があった。岩山の麓に石で作ら
れた国があって、泉から引かれた綺麗な
水がまだ水路を流れていた。今にでも何
万人もが住めそうなほど綺麗な町だった”
って」(第三話「過去のある国」より)他
全10話収録。



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北海道ツリーリング中の筆者

1972年生まれ。神奈川県出身。19歳からバイクに乗
っていますが、ようやく3回目の北海道ツリーリングに行
けました。20歳、33歳、39歳です。さて掲載。この
パターンだと、次は掲載で行くでしょうか？
答え：頑張って来年行つてやるー！

【関連文庫作品】

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学園キノⅠ②③④⑤
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- アリソンⅢ(上) ルトニを車窓から
- アリソンⅢ(下) 陰謀という名の列車
- リリアとトレイズⅠ・Ⅱ そして二人は旅行に付った(上)(下)
- リリアとトレイズⅢ・Ⅳ イクスタークの一着目(上)(下)
- リリアとトレイズⅤ・Ⅵ 私の王手帳(上)(下)
- メグとセロンⅠ・Ⅱ 三三〇五年の夏休み(上)(下)
- メグとセロンⅢ ウレックスの憂鬱
- メグとセロンⅣ エアコ村連続殺人事件
- メグとセロンⅤ クリーハップタウンの民
- メグとセロンⅥ 第四上級学校の日々

イラスト:黒星紅白

福岡在住独好きイラストレーター。飯塚武史名義でプレジ
デーション2「サモンナイト」シリーズキャラクターデザ
インを手掛けてます。今年の目標は発売日に買ったゲームを廉
価版が出る前にクリアする事。

カバー/監印版

時雨沢恵一

KEIICHI SIGSAWA

イラスト ● 黒星紅白

ILLUSTRATION: KOUHAKU KUROBOSHI

キノの旅 XV

— the Beautiful World —



「白く国」 — Taseki —

そこは、大きな湖を抱える国でした。

そして、白く国でした。

城壁も、路面も、家の壁も、屋根も、人

工物はどれもがしっともきれいに真っ白です。

「これは、徹底してるなあ」

「今日は曇りだけど、これは天気がいい日

は眩しそうだねえ、キノ」

キノとエルメスは、真っ白く国の中を走

り抜けていきました。やがて、湖の中央の湖

畔に、不思議な白い山を見つけた。

それは、白くて大きな二枚貝の貝殻で

作られた山でした。

高さは三十メートル以上あります。ペルト

コンベが、今も山の頂上に貝殻を運んでい

ます。そんな山が十も二十も並んでいる

のです。

かなり生臭い臭いが、周辺には漂ってい

ました。

山の裾野では、シヨベルカが忙しそう

に貝殻を運んで、機械へ入れていきます。

機械は貝殻を砕いて、次に白い粉にして

いきます。その粉を、煉瓦やセメントなど、

いろいろなものに加工しているようです。

「なるほど、湖で採れるのか」

キノが納得した様子で言う。エルメス

が下から訪ねます。

「じゃあ、あの貝の貝の中身は、どこに行つちや

うの？」

貝の中身は、

「はいはい！ 旅人さん！ 食べて行て

よ！ この国で毎日みんなが食べているの

「ユーだよ」

「はい、いただきます」

キノの胃袋の中に行くことになりまし

た。

レストランでキノの前に並べられたのは、

数種類以上の料理です。全部、貝の料理

でした。

「はい、こちらが焼き貝！ 本来の味が案

じめるよ！ こちらは貝のグラタン、葱の

お皿がわかれだ、チーズと味の相性

はばっちりだ！ こちらは貝と野菜の妙

め物！ 塩味がシンプルでもお勧め！ こ

ちらは貝の刺身！ 新鮮なら生でだて

食べられるんだす！ こちらは貝のパン！

上手く生地と混ぜるのが技なんだよ！

こちらは貝のデザート！ 甘くしん貝が

まるでフルリみん、でしょ？ こちらは貝

のお茶！ 貝のエキスをふだんに使った

キノはフルコースを食べて、感想を聞かれ

たエルメスに答えます。

「うん、美味しかったし、何より」

「何より？」

「面白かった」

翌日、貝が湖からとどろき水揚げされる

様子を見ながら、キノはこの国の住人に聞

いてみます。

「皆さん、貝が好きなんですか？」

すると、住人はとても悲しそうな顔を

して答えます。

「まさか、正確……、もう見たくもないで

すよ」

「ありや？ じゃあ、なんであんなに採って

みんな食べてるの？」



エルメスが聞きました。

「そうするしかないからです。この貝の繁殖力は異常で、人間が採らなければ、どこまでも増え続けます。すると死骸も大量発生して、湖の水は腐ります。私達は、この湖からしか水が手に入らないのです」

キノが訊ねます。

「すると、白い建物や道は？」

「貝殻を廃棄する場所がなくなるので、仕方なく使っているだけです。本当は、こんなに白いだけの景色は、みんな嫌です」

「ボクが食べた、貝のフルコースも？」

「貝の身を燃やすのも埋めるのも追いつかないので、しょうがないから食べているんです。飽きないように必死に美味しく食べられるメニューを開発して……。でも、正直みんなうんざりしています。どんなに美味しくたって、毎日こればかりでは飽きます」

キノが、エルメスをちらりと見てから、住人に訊ねます。

「この貝は、昔からこの湖にいたんですか？それとも、誰かが持ち込んだんですか？」

「昔からいましたよ。それこそ、数百年前の建国当時から。こんな状況になったのは……、わずか五十年ほど前からです」

「では、その時に、何があったんですか？」



「えつと……。それまでは、稚貝をたくさん食べてくれていた鳥がいたんです……」

「その鳥がいなくなってしまった、と？」

「はい……」

「その原因は、分かっているんですか？」

「ええ……。私達が、鳥を根こそぎ全部食べてしまったからです……。やってきた旅人が、あの鳥は美味しいですよ、と言ったので……。そして、食べてみたらあまりにも美味しくて……」







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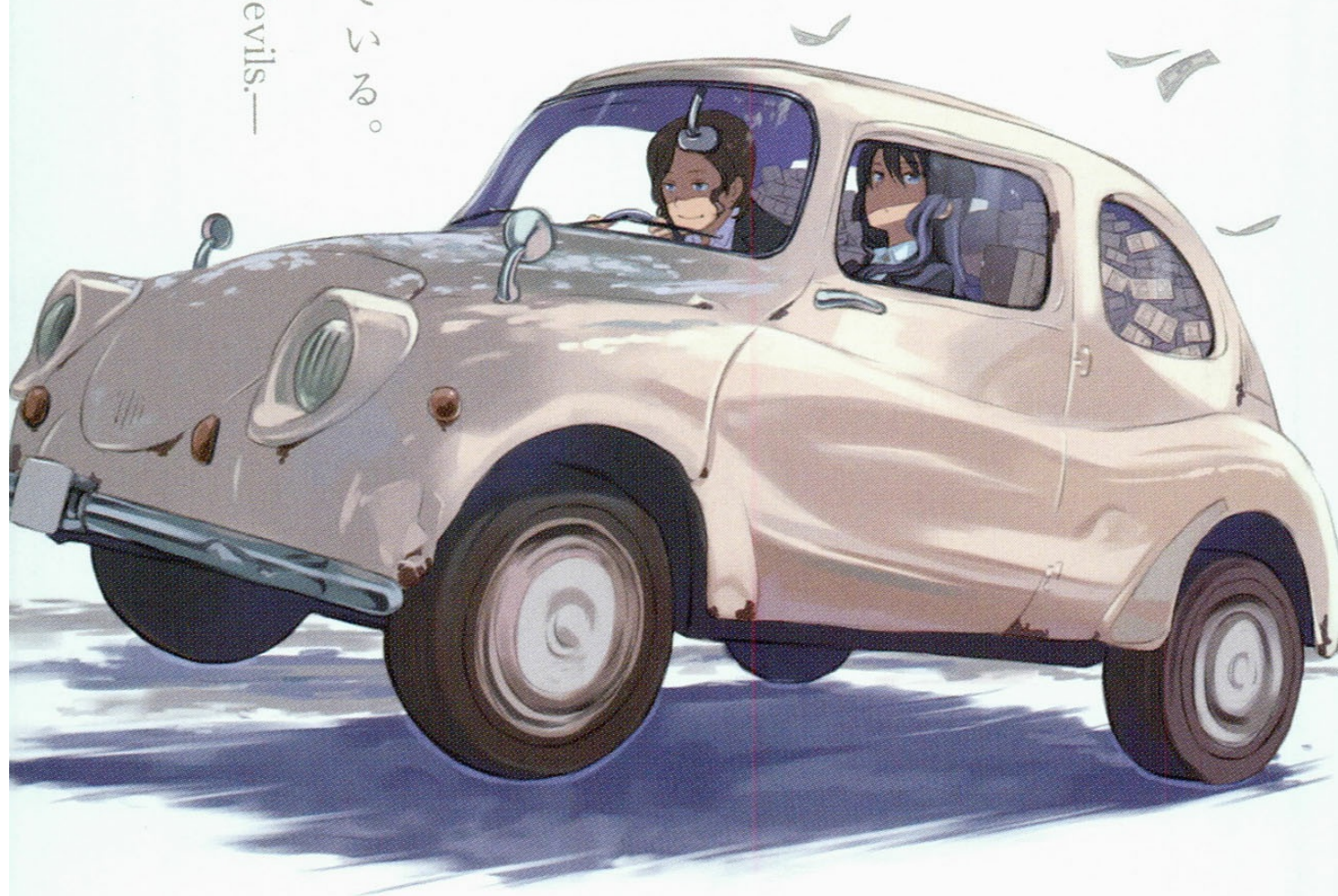
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— Order!・a —

Design Yoshihiko Kamab

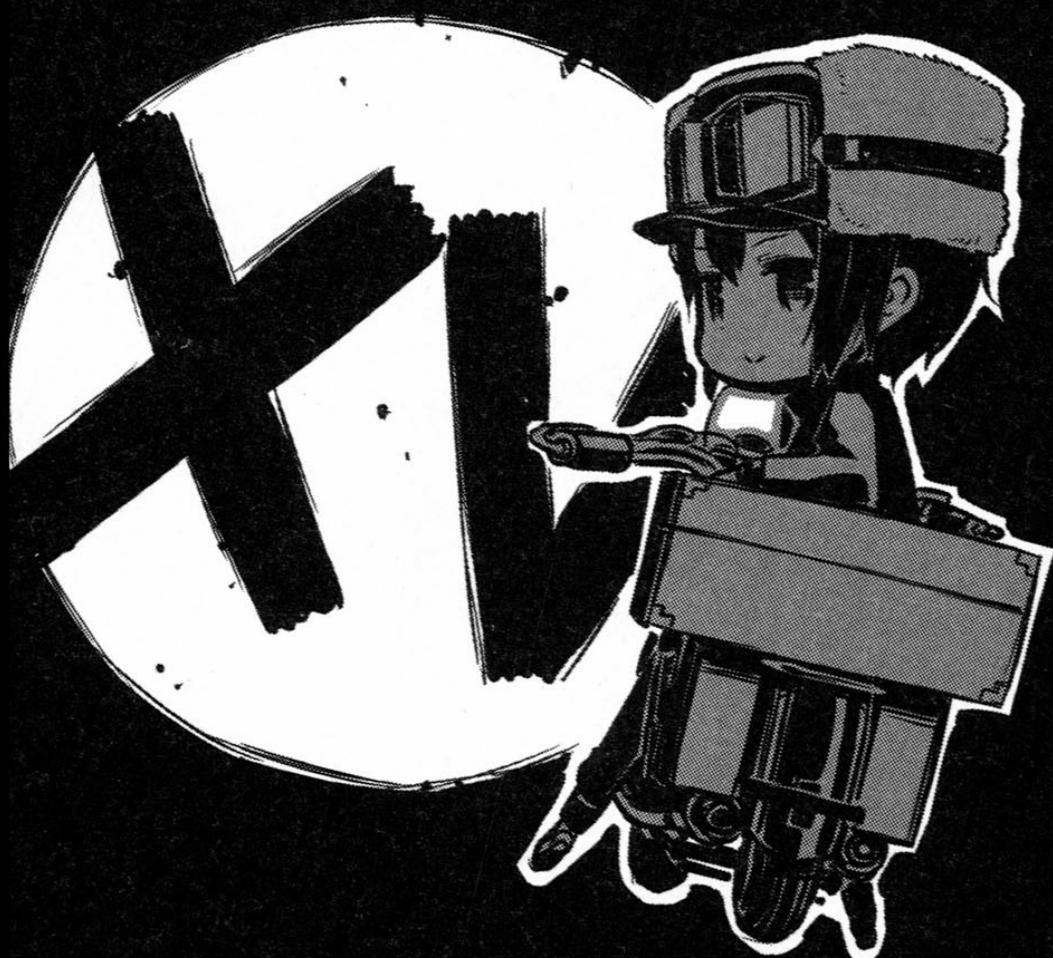
誰だって、悪いことはしない。
誰だって、何が悪いかは自分で決めている。

—We're No Devils.—



キノの旅

the Beautiful World



Frontispiece: A Land of Accidental Discoveries — Eureka!—

Once, in a region with several neighboring countries—



There was a country through which a white river flowed and emptied into a white lake.

There arrived in a small, rundown vehicle a pair of travelers—a woman and a man— who upon setting eyes on this scenery, were surprised, and so asked the country's inhabitants how the place came to be this way.

The citizens answered.

Because of the hot, white water spouting from the ground beneath the country, no fish could thrive in the lake, and no crops could grow in their fields. As a result, their people could only make scanty livelihood from their side jobs, and live off food imported from their neighboring countries.

The woman touched the water from where it sprung out of the ground.

Then she spoke.

“This is a hot spring. If you use the water for baths, I’m sure many tourists will come and visit.”

The citizens were not readily convinced by the woman’s words, so she ordered her fellow traveler to soak himself in the water.

The man reluctantly stripped down and submerged himself in the hot water up to his shoulders. And after a while,

“Aah~ This feels great...”



There was a country through which a white river flowed and emptied into a white lake.

The lake was surrounded with rows of buildings, and its shores were brimming with people. It was the very picture of prosperity.

There arrived in a buggy a group of travelers—a man, a dog, and a little girl—who upon setting eyes on this scenery, were surprised, and so asked the country's inhabitants how the place came to be this way.

The citizens answered.

Because of the hot, white water spouting from the ground beneath the country, it became known for its hot spring baths, and turned into a popular tourist destination among its neighboring countries. They were making so much money, and were giddy with joy over it.

Soon they became even wealthier, and began to employ citizens from their neighbors, continuing to earn money even without having to do anything themselves.

Seeing the citizens rave about their good fortune,

“How regretful.”

The young man only said this, and after their whole group have had their baths (Note: not in a mixed bath), they left the country.



There was a country through which a normal river flowed and emptied into a normal lake.

The lake was surrounded with rows of abandoned buildings. There were very few people that the place can aptly be called a ghost town.

There arrived in a motorrad (Note: a motorcycle, only denotes that it cannot fly) a traveler wearing a brown coat, who upon setting eyes on this scenery, was surprised and so asked the country's inhabitants how the place came to be this way.

The citizens answered.

The hot, white water that spouted from the ground beneath the country made it a popular tourist spot best known for its hot spring baths. This was what was left of it. Not too long ago, changes in the earth's crust caused the underground water to dry up. Naturally, the tourists left, and everything they earned were used up to pay off expenses and the loans for the construction of the buildings around the lake. It has gone back to the poor country that it was in the past.

"But it was a good thing. We were once crazed. To think we could earn so much without lifting a finger..."

The traveler and the motorrad relaxed in the now deserted shores of the lake.

Then the motorrad asked the traveler to dig up the sand of the lake. The traveler dipped her legs in the water and dug as she was told, then saw amidst the white sand tiny grains that occasionally glittered.

"That's gold dust. It was carried away by the river and deposited in this lake. No one seems to have noticed yet. I think there's quite a lot of it."

"..."

"What will you do Kino? Will you tell them about this?"

While looking at the glittering gold dust on her palm, the traveler answered.



Frontispiece 2: "A White Land" —Taste!—

It was a country with a big lake.

And it was a white country.

Everything—its ramparts, roads, the walls and roofs of the houses, and all things made by human hands—were pure white.

“How thorough...”

“It just happens to be cloudy today, but if it were a day with fine weather, everything here will be blindingly bright, Kino.”

Kino and Hermes were running through the pure white scenery. Eventually, they found a strange white pile along the shores at the center of the country.

It was made from the huge, white shells of bivalve mollusks.

The pile was over thirty meters in height, and even now, a belt conveyor was carrying shells to its top. Ten or twenty such piles were lined up along the shore.

The surroundings reeked of the fishy odor that drifted from them.

At the foot of the pile, an excavator was busy transporting the shells to a machine, which in turn pulverizes them and turns them into white powder, one batch after another. It seemed that this powder was processed into bricks, cement, and other various things.

“Oh, they probably caught those from the lake,” Kino said knowingly, and Hermes asked from below her,

“I guess so, but where do you think the stuff that were living in those shells went?”

—

“Welcome, traveler! Eat up! This is what we eat in this country every day!”

“Thank you, I’ll have some.”

The ‘stuff that were living in those shells’ ended up in Kino’s stomach.

The menu lined up before Kino in the restaurant were numerous kinds of dishes, all made from shellfish.

“These are grilled! This way you can enjoy its natural flavor! Over here’s shellfish gratin! The shellfish were finely decorated, and the cheese perfectly complements their flavor! This is fried shellfish with vegetables! I recommend you try it with this simple seasoning! This one’s shellfish sashimi! Yes, you can eat it fresh! We also have this shellfish bread! There’s a technique for mixing it with the dough! We also have shellfish dessert! The sweetened shellfish tastes just like fruit no? Also, try our shellfish tea made from shellfish extract!”

After eating her full course meal, Kino answered Hermes’ queries about the food.

“It was quite delicious. But more than that—”

“What?”

“It was interesting.”

—

The next day, Kino interviewed the country’s residents while she looked at the shellfish being steadily hauled from the lake.

“Does everybody here like shellfish?”

The citizens answered, but their expressions were miserable.

“No way. To be honest... we don’t want to see another shellfish again in our life.”

“Eh? Then why are you catching so much? And why do you still eat them?”
Hermes asked.

“We don’t have any choice. This particular mollusk reproduces at an abnormal rate. If we don’t catch them, they’ll multiply and spread all over the lake, and the dead ones will accumulate and poison the water. We don’t have any other source of water but this lake.”

Kino asked, “Is that also the reason for the white buildings and roads?”

“We’ve run out of places where we could dispose the shells, so we had to use them. To tell you the truth, all of us hate this landscape of nothing but white.”

“And that is also the reason why I ate a shellfish full course meal?”

“We couldn’t keep up with burning and burying the contents of the shells, so our only option was to eat them. We desperately thought up of all sorts of delicious dishes only so we would not tire of eating them... Still, we’ve had enough. No matter how delicious the food is, anyone would get fed up with it if it’s all you eat day in and day out.”

Kino took a glimpse at Hermes, then asked, “This shellfish... has it inhabited this lake originally? Or was it brought here by someone?”

“It’s been here for a long time. Even before the founding of the country several centuries ago. We only started to have this problem fifty years ago...”

“What happened around that time?”

“Let me see... Until then, there were plenty of these birds that eat the shellfish spawn...”

“And those birds disappeared?”

“Yes...”

“And do you have any idea how that happened?”

“Well... that’s because we’ve hunted and eaten them all... There was a traveler who told us that the bird was delicious... And when we tried to eat the bird, it really tasted so good, we couldn’t stop...”

プロローグ

「戦って死ぬということ・b」

— Order!・b —



Prologue: What it Means to Fight and Die • b — Order! • b—

The man screamed.

“GYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

And there, where the scream echoed like the cry of ripping silk, stood Ti, undaunted.

There was also me, Master Shizu, and several young men nearby.

“THAT’S NOT POSSIBLE! I-I-I’M—!”

The man fell to his knees, and covered his face with his hands, seemingly about to tear off his forehead.

Then with his fingernails, he clawed at the skin again and again, until the blood ran.

The young men stood behind the man in shock.

“What in the...”

Unable to take action, they stood there doing nothing, except to mutter these words. Master Shizu was no different.

“...”

And beside the quiet Ti,

“I AM! I— AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

The man continued to scream.

“WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

The scream that went on for a long, long time,

“Ah!”

Suddenly stopped.

The man extracted the hand persuader from the holster on his hip, and pressed it on his right temple.

“No. I want to die.”

He said, as he unlocked the safety of his persuader.

From where I stood, and from where Master Shizu stood—

It is not possible to reach him in time to stop him from taking his life.

As I looked at the man’s smiling face, all damp with tears, I also saw his resolve to dye it next with blood. I was only relieved that from where we stood, neither Master Shizu nor Ti, nor I, were in danger of getting hit by a stray bullet.

The trigger was pulled.

The hammer began to descend.

When—

It was stopped by a young man’s finger.

The young man jumped from behind, and reached for the persuader with his arm, then his hand, and finally with his finger.

It was truly just in the nick of time. The force that was supposed to hit and send the bullet flying was now squeezing at the young man’s little finger. The skin tore, and blood came oozing out.

“Eh?”

The teary-eyed man turned around, perplexed, and looked at the young man.

“Please excuse me.”

With his finger still blocking the hammer, the young man gripped the persuader, and quickly confiscated it.

“Wha... what are you doing...? Give that back!”

“No, I can’t do that.”

The young man responded to the man’s command, his tone bold and grave.

“‘No matter what the circumstances are, only after you have fought with all your might can you die!’ —You taught us that!”





第一話

「ケダモノの国」

— Standing Beast —

Chapter 1: "Land of Beasts" —Standing Beast—

In a forest thick with snow, a lone truck ran.

The dull grey sky continued to snow, and the sun was nowhere in sight.

Among the forest of tall conifers, the snow was piled high enough to completely cover a person's head.

The world sat still and silent, absent of wind and muffled by snow. The temperature was several degrees below zero.

And crashing through was the brown truck with its engine blaring, running over the snow like a ship on the ocean.

—

The truck had been specially modified in order to run on snow.

Really, the truck was meant to run on four tires, but instead, it had four "crawlers" (treads, tracks).

The crawlers were shaped into large triangles of wide rubber bands wrapped around several small wheels.

The truck's axles were connected to the wheels at the top of each crawler and were constantly spinning. If you've seen the kids' game where they race while inside a loop of cardboard, it's the same thing.

The truck kept from sinking into the snow at all because of its wide crawler bands, using the same principle of spreading out weight that snowshoes rely on.

And so, the truck continued on top of the snow, but if a human tried to stand in the tracks left by it, they would immediately fall through.

—

Inside the truck's cab, a slightly short but handsome man sat in the left-hand driver's seat.

He was covered from head to toe in light green clothing (with innumerable pockets) to protect him from the cold and even his feet looked warm in their heavy boots. He wore a brown knit cap on his head and leather gloves on his hands as he gripped the steering wheel.

A woman wearing black winter clothing sat to his right in the passenger's seat. She had long, sleek, black hair, but at the moment, it was collected inside a warm fur hat.

Between the seats were two persuaders (Note: a persuader is a gun), a rifle-type and a shotgun-type. They were attached to a rack by rubber strips so that they could be quickly drawn and fired.

The man spoke, "The snow here is even heavier than we heard, huh Master? I've never seen this much snow before in my life."

The woman called "Master" responded to the mixture of surprise and awe in a calm voice, "Me neither. And it's probably not done piling up yet either. We're still only halfway through the winter, after all."

"Uh huh," the man murmured, "but then, it wouldn't really be easier to come through here in the Summer, would it?"

"No, this whole area would be covered in mud. The winter snow is easier to drive through than the Summer muck. This is the only time of year that we can visit the country we're heading to."

"I wouldn't expect you to care so much about going someplace like that, Master, even buying a truck just for this," the man said, with more than a little surprise in his voice.

On that note, if you're wondering what this snow-covered truck was carrying on its bed, it was a car.

The small, yellow, and beat-up car that the two of them usually used for transportation had been dumped inside the truck, and their luggage was stacked on the car seats.

The truck also carried a heap of fuel containers that surrounded the car.

"I've heard rumors about this country for years, so I've always thought that if I

had the chance, I'd like to go."

"Does that mean there's a chance for us to score a large profit?"

The woman replied to the man's instinctive question, "Do you only see me as a miser?"

He countered the icy stare coming from the passenger seat with, "Well, yeah, exactly."

"I think we'd better discuss this again later."

"Uhh... without persuaders, I hope."

"Why not? I don't see the problem."

"I'll pass! — Changing the subject, is there a reason to bring the car along? We could just use the truck from now on; that way we'd be able to carry more luggage," said the man.

The female traveler replied firmly, "The truck is only temporary. Its too fuel inefficient and wasteful, especially with two of us."

"Well, that's true," the man nodded.

Thanks to its treads, the truck could drive even in rough conditions, but the engine had to work harder to do so, meaning it needed that much more gas. That's why they needed to bring along a small mountain of gas tanks.

"Once we hit a normal road, we should sell the truck. I don't know that we'll be able to get much for it though."

"Ah, so the loss is basically a rental fee. You should have told me so when we bought it."

"You never asked."

"Master... How old are you?"

"Not even 1000 yet."

"What a coincidence. Me neither."

The conversation petered out, but the truck rumbled on and the snow continued to fall.

"So, what kind of country is it?" the man asked, rekindling the conversation.

"It's supposed to be large and wealthy, blessed by river and forest so that everyone lives without ever knowing hunger."

"And?"

"I don't know."

"'I don't know', huh... What if it's dangerous? And everyone... is, uh, everyone is like a starving beast?" the man asked, half-joking and half-serious.

"If that happens, we'll kill or be killed. There's no peace to be had with beasts," the woman replied, half-serious and half-serious. [\[1\]](#)

—

And so the two of them continued through the forest.

The ground was mostly even, but occasionally a hill would swell up or a valley would appear like a great dent in the countryside. They had to move carefully and feel their way through, so naturally they couldn't drive too quickly.

"Why don't we stop here for now?" the man suggested, parking the truck.

On a normal day, they would have traveled this far before afternoon tea, but the first rule of doing anything outside is setting up camp while there's still usable daylight, and the winter sunset was particularly early.

The man scouted around the area with snowshoes and the shotgun persuader. Meanwhile, the woman stood watch on top of the truck's roof with her rifle in-hand.

The man stretched a thin wire around the surrounding trees as he walked, before returning and fastening the wire to a small box in the truck bed.

If a person or wild animal tripped the wire, the box would sound an alarm.

After setting up camp for the night, it was time for supper.

For travelers, or rather for all living things, it's important to stay somewhere near water. Luckily for them, they were surrounded by more than enough snow and ice.

That said, they couldn't just dump snow and ice into their mouths as-is. That

would lower their body temperature and sap their strength, so that should be avoided as much as possible.

The man began cooking from on top of the truck's roof.

First, he put a pot over a canister stove and melted snow in it until it came to a boil.

Then he added a kind of preserved food called "pemmican". It's a mixture of vegetables, fruits, and meat that's cooked and then hardened with animal fat to be stored in bags.

"Master, what flavor would you like tonight?"

"Good question. Spicy food would be a nice change of pace."

"Curry it is then." The man produced curry roux from his stockpile and added it to the stew.

Then, he added some macaroni, which they had bought in bulk from the last country, to the curry soup. It was thoroughly frozen, but it soon started to break apart in the boiling water.

After letting everything cook together a while longer, dinner was served: macaroni and curry soup with honey tea.

The meal was high in oil and calorie content, but it's necessary to have that much in the winter mountains. It was also high in salt and water, with sugar from the honey tea.

The soup blew large plumes of steam into the cold winter air, and the two travelers took turns eating.

First the woman ate, and once she was finished, the man took his turn.

They didn't take turns eating as master and servant, like a person and their pet dog, but rather so that one of them could keep watch while the other person was eating.

They finished eating as the sun set and the world sank into darkness. There was nothing left for them to do but sleep.

The woman climbed into the truck and wrapped herself in a thick sleeping bag

across both seats, as the man looked up to the sky and sighed, "Ahh, it's snowing..."

Under the drafty truck canopy, the man laid in his sleeping bag and clutched his shotgun, fully loaded with the safety on.

"I want to sleep naked under the bedsheets in a heated hotel room..." And as the man grumbled out his impossible wish, he closed his eyes.

—

The next day, around noon.

After driving through the raging snowfall all morning and crossing over two small mountains, they had finally arrived outside the walls of their destination.

The walls were the same slate gray as the overcast sky. They were also very tall.

"Whoa, that's impressive," the man thought out loud as he poked his head out the window to see. The snow whipped into his face mercilessly and he quickly decided to pull himself back into the truck.

—

Noticing the truck, a security officer walked out from the gate.

They carried relatively old-fashioned bolt-action rifles on their backs and wore garishly orange winter clothing, probably in order to stand out against the snow. They each had a coil of rope on his shoulder for pulling people out of snowbanks.

It should go without saying, but they wore a pair of snowshoes to keep from sinking into the snow, larger than the ones the travelers used.

The officers approached carefully, with their rifles held out in front of them. They frantically darted their eyes this way and that, as if terribly frightened of something, something other than the travelers.

Once the officers reached the truck, the woman told them she hoped to enter.

"Well then... Welcome to our country," was the reply. However, the officer's

behavior and tone of voice were unsteady, and he was visibly conflicted.

"Did something happen in the country?" the male traveler asked, but the officers were already backing away.

"You're authorized to enter, so would you mind asking once you're inside? Please head straight to the center, everyone should be gathered there. Okay, that will be all..."

With that, the officers hurried back to the gate, almost in a full sprint.

The man tilted his head, "I wonder what that was about. Too cold for them, maybe?"

—

The gate was drawn for them as they came to it, and since the snow was piled up to half its height, it had to be opened all the way.

The snow from outside tumbled inward as the gate opened and the truck rode the small snow ramp down.

As soon as the truck had passed, the gate slammed shut again. They drove on through the thick wall, which felt like a tunnel to them, on toward the heart of the country.

Then, the two travelers saw the country.

It was hard to see very far due to all the snow, but the country was obviously flat. The land was probably cleared for farming, so the trees were few and far between.

The snow was piled up, of course, but the road had been cleared so that there was only a thin layer of compacted snow over it.

There was a muscular-looking horse drawing a snow-plow behind it at a comfortable pace.

The truck ran down the road.

The treads, being triangle-shaped, add their full height to the truck, so it looked particularly tall, almost like a four-legged animal.

As the truck continued down the snowy road, one-by-one buildings came into

view. All of them were log cabins.

Because of the heavy snow, the ground floor of each house consisted only of thick support beams for the upper floors, and was used as a storage space for kindling.

There were wooden staircases used for climbing up to the entrance of each house.

The roofs were slanted at sharp angles to allow snow to slide off, so ultimately, the houses were surrounded by snowbanks on all sides.

The houses were spread far apart and the lots were large, so at first glance, they could almost be mistaken for resort villas.

The truck chugged on toward the center of the country.

Having been fitted with treads, the truck was quite an unusual sight.

Curious eyes peered out from the cabins that lined the roadside, as the country's citizens literally looked down on the strange truck.

The male traveler occasionally waved his hand in a show of goodwill.

—

When they finally reached the heart of the country, it opened into a wide area.

It seemed to be a park. There wasn't much snow piled up; instead, a mass of people and wagons were assembled.

More than one hundred people had gathered, young and old, men and women, all wearing the same felt coats. Standing apart from them was a group that wore black uniforms and carried persuaders slung over their shoulders, clearly the same as the officers from the gate.

"What's all this? Probably... not our welcoming ceremony, huh?" the male traveler said. Even from a distance, the crowd was obviously not in a welcoming sort of mood, and as the travelers drove closer, it only became more noticeable.

Everyone, the citizens and officers both, wore stern expressions on their faces.

"It almost looks like the police are getting ready for a perilous raid on a criminal safehouse. Oh, or maybe they're here to ambush us? In that case, bring it on, boys," the man quipped.

He parked the truck at the entrance, and together with the woman, they climbed out and greeted the citizens.

"Good day to you all! We're travelers that've been granted entrance to your country."

"Hello, everyone!"

The people standing closest to them returned their greetings with warm words, "I'm impressed you made the long journey here," and "Welcome, you're the first visitors in five years," and "It must have been hard getting here, please enjoy your stay."

Someone also offered to show them to a hotel if they hadn't already picked one. It was in every way a cordial welcoming. They didn't even have to fight anyone.

At the same time, in the center of the park, the conversation between the police and the citizens continued beneath the snowy sky. They didn't appear to notice the newly-arrived travelers at all.

"It might be rude of me to ask, but..." the female traveler began, "but why are the police gathered here?"

An elderly man replied, "Ahh... I'm afraid you two have come at a bit of a bad time."

"A bad time? Meaning?"

"We're currently in the midst of a disaster that will be remembered for years to come."

The travelers stood under the falling snow and listened intently.

"Oh? A disaster, you say... please tell us, if you don't mind."

"Well you see, a grizzly has been spotted near the country borders."

The male traveler was surprised by the older man's words, "Did you say 'a

grizzly'?"

"..." The woman's brow furrowed for a moment, but it was slight enough that no one noticed.

The citizen continued, "Oh good, so you two know of grizzlies, it seems?"

"Yeah, I think. — Basically, they're huge bears, right?"

"That's right."

The woman asked, "And they live in the surrounding area?"

The citizen shook his head from side to side violently, "No! I've never heard such a thing in my whole life. But then a month ago, when winter was just setting in, there was a sudden appearance in the forests outside the country."

"Any attacks?"

The woman's short question made the man's face cloud over, and she could guess at the answer even before he spoke.

"Fourteen people have already been attacked... Six were killed, and three more have gone missing, but they're probably dead by now too. The other five are still alive, but three of them were gravely injured to the point that they'll never walk again."

"That's terrible," the male traveler said.

"We go out into the forest for lumber during the winter. It's only possible when the snow has piled up, so we cut down enough for the rest of the year. The land inside the country walls needs to be kept for farming pastures, so we don't plant any trees. Without lumber from the forest, we won't be able to build anything, or light fires for cooking and staying warm. At least for now, we still have our emergency reserves, but we won't make it through the winter if this keeps up."

"Hmm, I see."

"Aside from that, there are tons of things we have to get done in the winter. We snare wild deer alive to bring back for raising, and we need sap for medicines. This country can only get by because everyone here works their hardest during every season of the year. But none of that is possible with a

grizzly out there. At this rate, our country will collapse!"

Once he was done with his speech, another citizen spoke up in a tone of admiration, "I'm amazed you travelers made it here safely... It's not safe, even inside your truck. The bear didn't even hesitate to attack someone riding a large sleigh."

At that, the male traveler shivered, just slightly, "Wow, that's grim."

The woman asked, "Do you have any idea why grizzlies would suddenly appear in the area?"

The elderly man answered her again, "No clue whatsoever. In fact, grizzlies aren't even native to this region. We didn't even know they were called 'grizzlies' until we found it in an animal encyclopedia from a traveling merchant."

"I see. What are their numbers and size?"

"So far, we've only encountered one. Its fur is black, except for a patch of shining white or gray hair on the back of its neck. As for its size, one of the witnesses said, 'it was four meters tall when standing, and it was so wide that it looked like a walking mountain'... but it's probably smaller than that, and the fear of being attacked made it seem bigger than it was."

The woman responded flatly, "It's not surprising at all for a grizzly to grow that large, as long as it gets enough nutrients."

The man chimed in, "I've heard the same thing, that their size can change a lot depending on the environment and prey, but at that size, it could bring down a large cow or rip a person's head off in one swipe."

The townsfolk grimaced in unison. But then someone in the crowd said, "Hey! You two seem to know a lot about grizzlies. Or at least way more than us! Plus, you look pretty tough! — What do you think about helping us out?"

At that, the crowd erupted with, "He's right!", "Good idea!", "How wonderful!", "We can still make it!", "Please help us!", and other cries of approval.

"The police are huddled up over there, trying to come up with a way to kill it,

but there's no point."

"There are usually no large animals around here, so we don't have any real hunters. A bunch of men went into the forest with rifles, but they didn't get anything done. In fact, one of them was attacked and got hurt during it."

"So now the police took over trying to deal with it."

"But everyone in the country is worried whether the police can actually handle it."

"I'm sure everyone would feel safer if you two helped out!"

"And we wouldn't ask you to do it for nothing! We'll reward you with whatever we can!"

"For now, please at least talk to them about it!"

In the face of so many pleading voices, the travelers weren't in a position to flat-out refuse.

"Fine, then we'll at least discuss it. Someone please introduce us to them," offered the woman, to the delight of the townsfolk.

Either the man had no objections or he just knew it was useless to try, but regardless, he kept silent.

—

30 police officers stood in single-file at the center of the park. They were all well-built men in their twenties and thirties.

They were all equipped for the heavy snow, with their black winter uniforms, gloves, boots, and snowshoes.

Their persuaders were the short, rapid-fire type with a long rectangular magazine jutting from the left side, capable of releasing ten hand-persuader shells a second.

At the head of the others, a policeman in his forties was puffing out his chest as he addressed the citizens, "Don't worry! This is the moment we've been training for!" This was undoubtedly their commanding officer. With his glorious mustache and chiseled physique, he radiated manliness.

His police uniform was crisply fitted, and he kept a large automatic hand-persuader holstered on his hip. It was an older model, and quite rare.

"The last hunting party failed because they were too unorganized. Tomorrow at dawn, all 31 of us will head into the forest as a unit. If we search in an evenly-spaced horizontal line, there'll be nowhere for that black devil to run."

The police captain spoke so confidently that his audience started to feel more assured as well. The policemen behind him smiled too, knowing that with so many people and weapons, it would be child's play to take down a single animal.

A voice called out, "Sir, excuse me for interrupting, but I have important news," and then the two travelers were brought forward and introduced to the captain.

"Well how about that. Welcome to our country! You're our first guests in a long time."

The elderly man explained, "These travelers seem to be familiar with grizzlies and they've offered to help. Would it be possible for them to join your hunt tomorrow?"

However, the police captain made his disapproval clear, "Look — I know how you feel, really, but it's not a good idea."

"Oh, why's that?"

The captain responded to the man's question in a calm voice, "First of all, we're the ones that were given this mission. We have an established chain of command. We train outside the country all the time, so we know the surrounding area. Our weapons are superior too. The single-shot rifles that the hunters were using can't even begin to compare with our rapid-fire persuaders. With enough bullets, it doesn't even matter what kind of monster we go up against."

"W-well, I suppose..."

"Finally, and most importantly, no matter what kind of emergency we're in, no police officer would ever let one of our visitors be exposed to danger. So please, I'm asking you to let it go."

Once the police captain had spoken his piece, the older man complied with, "Okay... I understand your reasoning now," and gave up trying to convince him. The last line about "not letting visitors be exposed to danger" had clearly struck a chord.

The female traveler said, "Well then, we'll defer to his decision."

The male traveler followed suit, "Agreed."

The police captain went right back into his bravado, "There's no need to worry! Travelers, please find a warm hotel where you can relax and put your feet up. Tomorrow night, you can come see the great beast's dead body!"

—

"Yahoo! A bed!" the male traveler shouted as he leaped onto the mattress.

They had been brought to a large log cabin hotel. The walls were made entirely of wood. There was a log burning in the fireplace in one corner that heated the whole room.

The sky outside the window was still the same dull gray, and the snow still continued to fall.

"Now all I need is a pretty girl and I'll be set. Shall I find one to have dinner with?"

He was spread out, lying on the bed in his underwear when the female traveler knocked and entered. She was lightly dressed too, but not surprisingly, she was wearing more than just underwear. She wore an elegant jacket over a pair of black pants.

"Hey, a pretty girl! Oh wait, it's you, Master. Is it time for dinner?"

"Not yet. I just have something to say."

"Oh? And what's that?"

"Your large-caliber rifle's still in the truck, right? The one you never use, since it's overkill?"

"Yup."

"Get it out of its bag and have it cleaned and maintained by tomorrow. Also,

ammunition; prepare a set of soft-points and slugs."

The man tilted his head in her direction. Why did they need to get that gun ready?

On top of that, she wanted heavy anti-personnel rounds — Soft-points (expanding bullets) for the rifle and slugs (large, solid bullets) for the shotgun are not everyday conversation topics.

"Are you plotting to overthrow the country, Master?" With her, it was a real possibility.

"What if I am?" she responded.

The man thought seriously for three seconds before answering, "We'd want to take advantage of the darkness while it's still night out, and start by sniping the police at long range. Once they're all dead, the country's leader — oh, I just found this out but apparently they're elected by popular vote, so they must be pretty well-respected — so if we take the chief hostage and threaten the citizens, we should be in full control. I think the two of us could pull it off in half a day?"

"Yeah, that doesn't too hard, but let's hold off on that for now," the woman replied casually.

"Well, there's no point to owning a country like this anyway; all they've got is snow. If you think of a reason, let me know," the man said, loosening up again. The two of them were dangerous on a fundamental level.

"I hope we don't end up needing it, but have it ready in case the time does come," the woman said, and turned on her heel.

"I don't see the point, but okay, I'll make the necessary preparations," the man assented.

—

The next day, at noon.

The sky was overcast. The temperature was about the same as it was the day before.

The two travelers were having lunch in a crowded restaurant. It was said to be

the best restaurant in the country, so they had come to see.

Their specialty was locally raised, grilled pork.

The table was made from half of a log, cut length-wise, and in the center, a charcoal pit had been carved out with wiring laid above it. Plenty of raw red meat was laid out on the table for the guests to grill themselves.

"This is amazing, Master! What is this? It's definitely not any kind of pork I know!"

"It certainly is delicious. It's tender, and there's a sweetness to it."

"Right? And also it's the middle of winter right now. Can we buy a few of their pigs to bring with? If it's just a couple, we have space in the truck to hang them. We could even make bacon."

"I'll consider it."

The two of them sat there, enjoying the true pleasure of traveling, that is, "eating delicacies you can only find in foreign lands", when a young man burst through the door screaming, "Bad news! The policemen were attacked!"

The restaurant patrons stirred in an instant.

Everyone knew that the police had left early in the morning on their hunting expedition. Some of them had even begun to wonder when they'd receive word that the grizzly had been slain.

"A-at the west gate, they're helping the people that managed to run away! Ten people were killed! Even the survivors are covered in blood! The dead bodies they brought back are all mangled up! They're just a mess of blood and guts!"

The frantic young man's report left the restaurant's customers pale in the face. Then, once they looked down at the red meat in front of them, they stopped eating. Some even rushed to the bathroom.

Unfazed, the male traveler manned the grill and said, "Oh dear, so the hunters became the hunted. — Master, the meat's ready, so help yourself."

"I'm not surprised. — Don't mind if I do," came the response from the woman across the table, as she scooped up the meat.

The man grinned at her, "So you were expecting that to happen all along."

"What do you mean by 'that'?"

The man lowered his voice, "You know what I mean. With their equipment, those policemen never stood a chance against the grizzly. I mean, those .32 caliber rounds they use aren't heavy enough to kill a huge beast like that."

"That sounds about right."

"...Which means that bringing along more people doesn't help them at all. If anything, it could hurt them. If one or two people get antsy, that could spread to everyone else. Training to handle criminals isn't useful for handling wild animals. They can't even surround it without risking friendly fire. So even if the two of us went along, we'd have trouble getting out alive, let alone killing it."

"More or less, yeah."

"It's just like you not to explain that and stop them, Master," the man said, almost cheerfully, as he laid more meat onto the grill top. He was still far from done eating.

The woman lowered her voice too, "Even if I tried, they wouldn't have stopped, would they? That police captain seems — rather ambitious. I heard rumors that he's aiming for the country chief's seat."

"Ooh. Your ears are as quick as ever."

"I heard he's popular enough that it's just a matter of time. He must have gotten impatient and tried to speed things up by playing the hero, and now his subordinates have fallen prey as a result."

"I see. So he doesn't mind cannibalizing his own men. But can we talk about how good this meat is? What makes it so different from regular pork?"

In contrast with the laid-back travelers enjoying their meal, the rest of the restaurant-goers were in an uproar over the news. Some of them were probably friends and family to the policemen. Several people ran out the door wearing worried expressions.

The citizens that stayed behind in the restaurant were nervously discussing what this might mean for the country's future. How could one wild animal

singlehandedly bring a country to ruin?

The restaurant employees wore the same concern on their faces as they cleared away the uneaten meat. The travelers, on the other hand, had already cleaned their plates entirely.

Then...

"I was told the travelers that arrived yesterday came here, are they still around? If so, our leader was hoping to meet with you, if you'd be so kind as to come with me," a man's voice boomed, as he entered the restaurant and the room fell silent again.

—

The two travelers were taken by a horse-drawn sled to a large building at the center of the country.

It wasn't as impressive as the towering buildings that some other countries had, but it was an astounding size for a log house. It was the official residence of the country's leader.

And waiting for them in a portrait-adorned office was a man of about 70.

He was thin, and his legs must have been frail, for he sat in a wooden wheelchair that could also function as a sled, fitting for such a snowy country.

There were several muscular men guarding him.

He was introduced as the 154th chief, and the female traveler responded with elegance and poise. Even the male traveler acted properly in greeting the chief and introducing himself.

Of course, he did not tell the chief how he had contemplated taking him hostage the night before. They sat down when they were invited to do so.

The chief personally explained once again the precarious situation that the country was facing.

It was mostly the same as what they had heard the day before, but he also mentioned that 20 police officers had died and 8 more had been wounded. Quite a few more than there were previously.

He also went into detail on what exactly happened in the attack.

—

The police squad headed out at daybreak —

They discovered the bear's tracks in the northern part of the woods, not far from the country walls.

It wasn't snowing at all this morning, so the tracks were definitely fresh. With that, hunting down the bear would be simple, and so the men eagerly followed the footprints.

They were following the tracks up a hill, slowly struggling their way up the 10-meter incline, when it happened. The grizzly appeared at the top of the hill and came hurtling down in an instant. Down toward the policemen.

The grizzly was definitely more than four meters long, and it crashed down over them like a black boulder.

The policemen had the safety on on their guns to prevent accidents, and on top of that, many of them were over-confident, so none of them were ready to be able to shoot immediately.

The few policemen in the rear that actually managed to fire weren't able to get a clear shot on the charging bear. And so it was that the grizzly tore its way through the center of the thirty officers.

The policemen panicked.

The grizzly bear sliced through the bodies of the closest policemen as if they were no more than blades of grass.

It could only be described as a massacre.

There were men whose faces were torn off, men whose innards were ripped out. Another had his bones snapped inside its massive jaws and was then tossed into the sky. Some men had their arms removed, still clutching their persuaders. When one man tried to escape up a tree, the bear stood back on its hind legs and swiped its paw, detaching both of the man's legs and sending him flying away.

The surrounding policemen did try to shoot, but they were scared of shooting

each other.

A few shots did hit their mark, but the bear didn't even seem to flinch. In anything, that only seemed to fuel its rage further as it continued to rampage.

The police captain fired his prized gun at the beast as he tried to keep his men from fleeing, and he scored several hits on the bear's back — but it had no effect.

In less than a minute, the grizzly had turned 20 poor men into a bloody mess. The defiant men, the confused and the scared men, the bear killed them all the same.

When the bear's rampage was over, it calmly walked away. It shot one last parting glance at an injured man, who promptly fainted.

The police captain and the 10 others that had somehow made it out alive were in no condition to chase after it.

They did everything they could to save the others, but four had already been instantly killed. Eight more died at the scene, one after another, all sobbing that they didn't want to die yet.

The survivors barely managed to drag the rest of the injured men back to the gates.

It was physically exhausting, and they worked in constant fear that they might be attacked from behind at any moment. Thankfully, the bear did not follow them.

They entrusted the wounded with the officers at the gate and then resolutely walked back, only to find a gruesome sight waiting for them.

The grizzly had already returned to the scene of the attack, unreservedly devoured the dead bodies, and then left again.

The men that had been so neatly lined up before were now just corpses strewn about, lying on the red snow.

There were also several severed arms and legs, as well as a disembodied head that had been flung into the distance. There were corpses with gaping holes in them where only their bowels had been eaten. There were trampled corpses

beginning to sink into the snow.

It was no longer even possible to identify the bodies.

Someone's neck was stuck on a tree branch, probably thrown away by the bear during its meal.

The bear must have saved a corpse to eat later, because there was a winding trail of blood leading into the woods, but none of the officers made a move to give chase.

They made no effort to confirm the number of casualties, they just counted how many of them had survived.

Compared to bringing back the wounded officers, it was much easier to carry back the minced remains of the 12 dead men.

—

Once the chief had finished his account, he asked candidly, "Can the two of you... conquer that demon?"

"I can't make any guarantees, but if you want to hire us, we will take it on. We'll begin preparing immediately and then the two of us will head into the forest tomorrow morning," the female traveler declared.

She said "if you want to hire us", that is, "we won't do it for free." She deliberately left out any specific price.

She said "the two of us", that is, "we won't bring any tagalongs."

The chief replied immediately, "Please do. Any reward I can give you, other than my citizens' lives or property, I will. Even take my life, if you wish. I don't have that many years left anyway."

The color drained from the faces of the chief's retainers.

The male traveler grinned at the chief's overwhelming chivalry. He couldn't help but think to himself, "Even if we had taken him hostage, I never would have been able to kill him."

The female traveler gave a single curt nod, "We can discuss the reward after we kill the thing, but we don't need or want your life, just something we can sell

for travel expenses."

The retainers relaxed, having feared that she might ask for something like citizenship.

At that moment, the hallway grew loud with the sound of footsteps.

"Chief!"

The door swung open, and a man stormed into the room. It was none other than the police captain.

He was still in uniform, with dark splotches of blood here and there. He didn't appear to be injured anywhere, so it was undoubtedly the blood of his subordinates.

"We can still fight! Don't bow down to these outsiders," the captain shouted, standing next to the seated travelers with a desperate look on his face.

"..." The chief said nothing, he just shook his head.

"Chief! Please give me another chance! Let me have revenge for the deaths of my men! Let me do this! I'll go alone if I have to! I'll bring a bomb if I have to! I'll die if I have to! Please let me take responsibility!"

The chief looked at the screaming police captain and said, very calmly, "I'm the one who approved that plan. The responsibility lies with me."

"But?"

"Once this is resolved, I will take responsibility and resign. At that time, there must be someone to lead the country after me. In this, it would be problematic for you to die now. I take it you understand my meaning."

"... Chief..." The captain hung his head in defeat. He looked ready to cry.

"Ah yes, what a touching moment," the male traveler thought. Of course, he didn't say it out loud.

On the other hand, the female traveler said, "Mr. Police Captain. You have done as much as you can, and there's no shame in that."

He showed no reaction to the woman's impeccable consolation, so she continued, "This time, leave it to us."

The chief asked, "Do you have a plan?"

"To an extent. It may be a bit long, but please bear with me —"

—

"Y-you think we'd allow you to do that?" the police captain shouted defiantly, paying no mind to the close quarters of the office. He had been offered a seat, but he jumped back to his feet upon hearing the plan.

"Well, that's a fairly natural response," the male traveler thought. Of course, he didn't say it out loud.

As for the chief, he considered it for a long while before simply saying, "Will that plan — really kill the beast?"

—

The next day, in the early morning.

The sunlight bounced off the truck that sat under the open gate.

The weather was clear, almost as if by mistake. The sky was blue and endless, the snow was silver and radiantly beautiful.

Because of that, the temperature was colder than usual, sitting at about -10 degrees.

The two travelers sat in the truck, wearing their winter clothes, hats, gloves, and sunglasses.

Also in the cab with them were seven persuaders strapped to the rack.

They were all high-power, and one was even a fully-automatic military rifle.

All of the persuaders were fully loaded, with extra magazines prepared.

Also, the truck had undergone some strange modifications. Firstly, a sharpened metal plate was attached to the front of the truck for pushing past trees.

There were wooden boards tied upright to the left and right of the driver and passenger seats, respectively.

This way, if the bear suddenly attacked the truck, the boards would protect

them. Of course, with the grizzly's power, it might still be able to break through the wood, but it would at least hold for a moment.

The canopy and metal frame had been removed, leaving the yellow truck bed was naked.

Two large structures that looked like water cannons were mounted on the sides of the truck, like a hairstyle with long side bangs. There were two tanks resting in the truck bed, with small motorized pumps used for farming attached.

It was practically a fire truck, set up so that they could spray water over long distances.

"Alright Master, it's time to go," the man in the driver's seat said.

"Whenever you're ready," the woman in the passenger's seat replied.

The man stepped on the accelerator and the engine sputtered to life. The truck gripped its tires on the snow, pushed its way up the hill, and crept into the snowy forest.

—

"What an insane plan," a single policeman murmured from atop the wall, "burning down the forest..."

The plan that the woman laid out for the chief was ruthlessly violent.

Attach water cannons to the truck, coat the forest in lighter fluid, and then burn it down.

Because of all the snow, the forest fire shouldn't spread disastrously far, but a sizable range was still bound to be destroyed.

Unlike other animals, the grizzly bear wouldn't run away at full speed upon seeing the fire, but it also wouldn't willingly go toward the fire, especially with such a sensitive nose.

While the bear is disoriented by the fire and smoke, the travelers could find it and then mercilessly gun it down.

This was no longer "hunting", it was a military-scale search and destroy operation.

The police captain's fit of rage wasn't unreasonable, but in the end, the country chief decided to approve the plan and explain it to the citizens.

And so the truck drove on.

—

"Well, since we have the chief's permission and all, here we go," the man in the driver's seat said cheerfully, as he pressed down on the gas pedal.

The footprints left by the policemen from the day before were still there, so they slowly followed the tracks onward.

Before too long, they were about halfway to the site when the woman said, "Around here should be fine," and strapped on a gas mask.

The two travelers always carried full face masks for when they needed to use tear gas.

Both of them were accustomed to the masks, so it only took a moment to secure the mask in place and remove the cap over the mouthpiece.

Once their masks were prepped, the woman flipped a switch near the driver's seat.

The pumps behind them started moving. A thick, dark brown liquid began spraying out of the hoses on either side of the truck.

The fluid was a mix of cooking oil, gasoline, rubber spray to add viscosity, and things like cooking spices and medicines to give it a terrible stench that the male traveler had concocted. Quite a dangerous mixture, all around.

The fluid clung to the trees and dyed the snow.

The man inched the truck forward. The woman had already turned off the hoses, and now, aiming a rifle out the window, she stiffened her left arm and fired once.

The tracer bullet slammed into a tree, causing it to burst into flames immediately. From there, the fluid on top of the snow ignited and carried the flame over to the next tree. The fire fanned deeper into the forest.

Smoke billowed into the air, carrying along its disgusting stink.

The truck chugged forward against the backdrop of flames and white smoke. They gushed out more fluid, fire more bullets, and watched the forest burn.

By the time they made it to the site of yesterday's attack, the fire had grown 10, maybe even 20 times as large.

—

From the top of the country walls —

The police watched as the vast forest was steadily consumed by the ever-growing fire.

One officer seethed, "Our forest... They didn't even give it a second thought..."

Another policeman countered uncertainly, "But... if that's the only way to solve the problem..."

"..." The police captain stood silently with his arms crossed.

The flames and smoke grew closer to where the police had been attacked, and before too long, they had proceeded deeper into the forest, in the direction the grizzly had run.

—

"Found you—!" the man yelled happily, not even 500 meters from where the police force had been attacked.

To be fair though, 500 meters on foot in the heavy snow is still quite a long distance. It was only because they were driving the truck that they made the journey so easily.

There was a trespasser standing just beyond a thicket of trees. There were thin trails of smoke rising nearby, but the huge black mass was easy to make out against the white snow.

"Master, one o'clock. 50 meters out!" The man floored the gas pedal as he shouted to the woman. Because the gas masks muffled his voice, he had to shout louder than usual.

The forest-killing truck's engine roared and charged toward the bear at full

speed. It slammed through the thin saplings in front of it and flattened them with no reservation.

The shape moving lazily over the snow was unquestionably the black grizzly. It was as big as the stories suggested.

The bear was casually heading upwind to escape the fire and the smoke.

"Good. Turn to the left."

"The rest is up to you," the man said, and following the woman's instructions, he adjusted the steering wheel and accelerator. Underneath his gas mask, the man's face was beaming with glee.

The woman had stowed away the rifle for lighting fires and replaced it with a much higher power, automatic rifle with a scope. She had everything set up and pointed out the window.

The gas mask over her face made it impossible to perfectly line herself up against the rifle, but it wasn't enough to be a problem.

The woman calmly disengaged the safety and aimed at the bear.

The truck's rattling made her take longer than normal just to aim. Just as she had the shot lined up, the black figure disappeared out of sight.

"It got away. There must be a hill that it descended down," the woman said, as she pulled the rifle back in.

"Roger that. In pursuit," the man said, and he took careful stock of their surroundings.

The bear's escape route gently sloped into a gorge. Judging from where the trees had grown, it looked possible to descend farther into the valley from the right.

"We're moving down in. It would've been easier for the bear to go down too. Brace yourself." The man turned the wheel and the truck swung far to the right. The truck's treads juddered as they turned.

And then the truck charged forward once again.

The truck let out an animal-like roar, louder than any bear, and rushed on

through the snow.

As they approached the ravine, the woman pointed her rifle out the window once again.

The man kept the wheel steady with his left hand, and in his right hand he gripped the shotgun. If the opportunity arose, he was ready to fire out the left window.

The truck plowed through the snow and pushed away the thin foliage as it descended into a basin that was roughly 40 meters wide.

And then, "There it is."

There it was, standing in the center of the basin. It must have given up trying to climb the banks of the gorge and chosen to push through the snow to come down here instead. Just as the man predicted.

They were only 20 meters away from the grizzly now, close enough to make out the eyes on its face.

The bear's silver eyes almost looked like bullets as it stared at the truck.

The truck must have seemed like some kind of monster that was several times the bear's own size, but still, the bear stared at the truck, unflinching.

—

The man had stopped the truck, and he returned his shotgun to the gun rack and let out his voice in amazement, "Whoa, he really is huge..."

And then, checking to make sure their smoke and stink hadn't reached this far yet, he took off his gas mask. Looking at the bear, he said, "Don't scowl at us like that! It's nothing personal!"

It wasn't loud enough for the bear to hear, and even if it was, it's not like the bear would have understood it, but he still felt like saying.

"But we can't leave you alive after you've tasted human flesh. After all, humans are pretty tasty. If you find something delicious and convenient like that, of course you'll eat it again."

While the man has holding his intimate conversation, the woman had also

thrown off her gas mask and was now setting up her shot in silence. She stole occasional glances to the side to make sure there wasn't anything else in the distance.

"Look, the grilled pork I ate yesterday was really good! So it's not like I don't understand how you feel, my friend," the man continued, "So yeah, sorry. — That's all."

And with that, he ended his one-sided conversation.

He glanced over to the woman in the passenger's seat and said, "Go ahead, Master. Execute it, no mercy," speaking as if he were casually offering her the last cookie.

Without saying anything, the woman rested the rifle's tip on top of the window frame, peered down the scope, and breathed in.

The bear just stood there.

It didn't give off any menacing behavior; rather, it just seemed to show off its dignified body, like a proud and mighty hero.

Staring at that figure through her sunglasses and rifle scope, the woman's eyes grew wide.

She felt her finger on the trigger and pulled.

—

From the center of the small basin, the sound of harsh gunfire screamed into the air.

Even from the high country walls, the sound was faint but distinctly audible.

The police force was a buzz of, "Did you hear that?" "Ah! They fired!" "Did they get it?" "Is it dead?"

"..." The police captain stood silently with his arms crossed, but a thin smile played on his lips.

—

"W-what happened, Master?" the man asked, with a rare expression on his face.

The bear had taken the hit to the right side of its stomach and it was waddling away to the right. It limped painfully up the slope of the basin, leaving a trail of blood behind it.

The man stared at the woman to his right as she calmly flicked the safety on the rifle and stowed it back onto the rack. "Follow after it, but keep a distance," was the order she gave, choosing not to answer his question.

"So you missed its heart on purpose, didn't you? Why didn't you kill it?"

"The situation has changed. We'll kill it, just not yet. It's bleeding enough that it'll probably die soon anyway, but for now just drive after it."

"..." The man didn't understand at all, but he complied, "Understood."

He pushed down on the accelerator and released the clutch.

—

The bear ran away in desperation.

It waded through the heavy snow, giving occasional yelps of pain as it moved deeper into the forest.

The truck chased after it from a distance.

"Where do you think it's running to?" the man asked, with the truck cruising at low speed.

He didn't really expect an answer, but the woman gave an immediate reply, "It's going home."

"What?"

"Its home. If something happened to you, wouldn't you want to die in your own home?"

"Well, I..." The man's dumbfounded expression was soon replaced with a serious one. "Master. What did you see? About that bear."

"Oh? Why are you so sure I saw something?"

"That's the only explanation I can think of. What did you see, looking through that scope?"

The woman sat in silence for a few seconds before answering. "A collar."

—

"Oh hey! You're finally back! And you're both unharmed, from the looks of it!"

By the time the travelers had made their way back to the gates, the forest fire had calmed down on its own.

That said, it was only after so many trees had already been burnt beyond use.

The sun was starting to sink, it had already been more than half a day. Before the travelers had come back, the policemen were starting to worry that the sun might set entirely without seeing the truck return.

Once they heard the gunfire, they had expected the travelers to return soon, and they grew restless the longer they waited from the country walls.

They ate lunch at 12, and then had tea in the afternoon, but there still hadn't been any sign of the travelers.

"Do you think they were eaten..?" more than one of the policemen began to wonder.

However, none of them were brave enough to volunteer to check.

"They're dragging the grizzly's body behind them! They got him! Those two travelers really did it!" A policeman spotted the truck through his binoculars and jumped up and down in joy.

—

The country's chief had been worrying all day, along with the rest of the populace.

When the news spread that the truck had slain the grizzly and was returning, the country came alive with a buzzing excitement.

The chief, who had been waiting in his office, nodded his head countless times in satisfaction and said, "Alright, let's all go out to meet the brave travelers. We should gather everyone that isn't in the middle of something urgent. Today is a day for celebration. Arrange for a banquet."

Having given out those instructions, he made his way out to the park at the

country's heart.

—

The black mass that emerged from the gate after the truck was undeniably the grizzly's dead body.

The bear's hind legs were tightly bound with rope to the truck's frame, and was slowly being pulled along.

A small red line was being drawn over the snowy road behind the bear.

The citizens came out onto the roadside and threw snowballs at the demon that had been tormenting their country.

They would have loved to throw rocks instead, but snow was all they had at hand, so they compromised by compacting the snowballs as tightly as they could before throwing.

They hit the bear over and over with snowballs, but the dead giant didn't so much as twitch from its rest.

At the same time, there were cries of, "You two did great!" "Thank you so much!" "I knew you could do it!" "Our saviors!" — Words of praise and admiration for the man in the driver's seat and the woman in the passenger's seat from the hearts of the people as both sides of the road were flooded with smiling faces.

However, the male traveler wasn't smiling, "What a joke, Master."

"I'll explain it to them. You just get ready to shoot, like normal." The woman wasn't smiling either. Not that she usually smiled a lot anyway.

Behind them in the truck bed, covered by a cloth canvas —

There were the bodies of two adults and two children that had frozen to death.

The man gave a worn-out murmur, "Ahh, I'm hungry. I want to eat that pork again."

—

There were a ton of people waiting in the center of the country for the truck

to arrive. Everyone wore an expression of excited joy.

The country chief, the police captain, and all of the policemen were there.

Everyone was waiting for their two heroes, the truck, and the black demon's dead body.

In order to keep the citizens from rioting too much upon seeing the dead grizzly, the policemen kept them at bay, 10 meters back from the center of the park.

The policemen were really the ones that wanted to destroy the body the most, but they had no choice but to obey their orders.

The truck's roaring engine stopped, and the air turned still. The crowd immediately became silent as they watched.

The two travelers opened their doors and stepped out with their heads low, as if ducking under a tree branch.

Once they were standing before the country chief and the police captain, the woman spoke, "We've fulfilled your request."

"I have witnessed your courage and cleverness. On behalf of the whole country, let me offer you our gratitude. Thank you very much, truly." Having said that, the country chief tried to stand on his weakened legs so that he could bow.

His retainers began to panic, but the female traveler said, "Please, there's no need for that."

Once he sat back down, she added, "I have something to discuss. Please come over to the bear with the police captain."

They moved next to the black body, which was surrounded by a single file of policemen.

The woman said, "This is the beast we killed. Please see for yourself."

The country chief's face clouded over, "How fearsome... This is the demon..."

The police captain next to him said, "There's no mistake... That's the one that attacked us..." He glared at the beast that had eaten so many of his

subordinates.

The male traveler began his analysis, "This is undoubtedly a grizzly. Its over four meters long, male. It looks like it was still young, but now it's dead."

Then, he picked up one foreleg to show off its massive claws, which could have passed for knives. He let go, and the paw lifelessly drooped back down.

And then, with a serious look on his face, he surprised everyone listening, "His name was Blackie."

—

"What?" the country chief asked, blankly.

"What're you saying?" the police captain echoed the chief's question on reflex.

The other police officers and citizens also looked at the traveler in confusion.

"Blackie. That's this guy's name," the man repeated.

"Oh I see, that's the name you two gave him? I've heard it can be customary to name your trophy kills," the chief replied.

Upon hearing this, the crowd hummed in agreement.

That's right, the hunters should have the right to name it. From now on, they should also refer to it as Blackie.

"No. We weren't the ones to name it," the female traveler declared.

When the crowd grew even more confused at this, the male traveler leaped onto the truck bed and tore away the tarp.

Then, he raised up on of the dead bodies. "Officer, please give me a hand here." he called out to the policeman closest to him and handed them the body.

At first, the policeman had thought it must be a log or something. When he realized it was a dead body, frozen stiff as a pole, he dropped it immediately and let out an "ugh..."

"Please line them up next to the bear," was the male traveler's polite request.

The bodies were an adult man, an adult woman, a boy of about 15, and a girl

of about 12.

None of them were from this country, and they all wore heavy clothing made from down. They were all hardened by ice.

Their torsos and limbs were all crusted with snow, but strangely enough, their faces were free of ice and snow, making it easy to see their resting faces.

As he looked at each of the bodies, the chief furrowed his brow and said, "Just who are they...?"

"..." The police captain was silent.

"These bodies?" the woman began, raising her voice, "We discovered these bodies today, outside the country. First of all, they're clearly travelers just like us."

The chief asked, "How... So without making it into our country, they fell victim to the grizzly?"

"No," came the woman's immediate response.

The male traveler came down from the truck and he glanced at the girl's dead body, and then at the bear's.

Then, he grabbed the shotgun persuader from off the truck bed.

In an uncharacteristically loud voice, the woman shouted icily, "They're the ones that named their pet Blackie. They were victims of your police captain over there."

—

In the next moment, several things all happened at once.

Starting with the country chief, the citizens opened their mouths in bewilderment, unable to comprehend what they had just heard.

The police officers turned to look at the accused captain.

The captain flung his arm down into the holster at his hip and drew out his hand-persuader, turning to aim at the female traveler.

The female traveler continued to stare at the captain, not speaking or moving.

—

A gunshot echoed through the park, sending a shudder through the backs of the people in the crowd, as if they had all been struck by a whip.

"Gah..." The police captain let out a scream and dropped his persuader onto the snow. He crouched down onto the ground and held his throbbing right hand in his left.

However, no blood flowed from the captain's hand.

The male traveler put away the persuader and said to the astonished chief, "It's a low-power rubber bullet. It won't kill him."

—

The chief, the citizens, and the policemen —

They had all seen the captain draw his persuader and try to shoot the female traveler.

A voice shouted at the crouching captain, "What are you doing? Have you lost your mind?"

"..." The chief's retainers moved in closer, and when the captain moved to pick up his persuader, they grabbed him by the arms.

"W-what are you doing? Let go of me!" the captain barked.

"No, what are you doing?!" the chief roared.

The chief turned to his bodyguards, "For now, just keep him under control."

Two of the retainers pulled the captain to his feet.

A third picked up the captain's persuader and emptied out the magazine.

"Wait! That woman slandered me! That's why I —" the flustered captain began to protest.

"You tried to shut us up. You figured that if you killed us, later on you'd talk your way out of it somehow," the woman said calmly.

"You're just going to believe her?!"

"I'm talking right now, so please sit quietly for a bit."

The captain continued to bark, "Shut up! You think you can entrap me, when I'm an officer of the law? You've got some nerve! Somebody, arrest these two now!"

The chief said, "For now, just keep silent."

"But I — mmph!" A retainer gagged the captain with a handkerchief.

The chief looked at both the apprehended police captain and the female traveler, and then he said grimly, "I intend to listen to his explanation later. Right now, let's hear your side of the story."

—

Rewind to when they were chasing the wounded grizzly.

"A collar."

Once he heard this, man blurted out, "No way!" without thinking.

But once he saw that the woman was still wearing her usual expression, "Well... Leaving aside if you were looking with just your eyes, I suppose there's no way you'd ever misjudge it with a scope."

"What do you think I am?"

"Leaving that aside, a collar...?"

"Yes. It was mostly covered by fur, but I definitely saw a collar. It was a silver-colored metal ring, probably a nametag."

"So that means... he's someone's pet?" the man asked, as he continued to drive. They had climbed the hill, and now they had a clear view of the swaying grizzly's rear end.

The woman nodded, "Yes, and that explains why a single grizzly suddenly appeared outside of its normal habitat."

"I see. Someone's been bringing it around on their travels, and..."

"It should also be hibernating right now, but I've heard stories of bears that can't get enough to eat and don't go into hibernation. At first, I thought it was one of those cases and it came this far looking for more prey, but that didn't quite fit. However, if it's someone's pet, it would have a steady supply of food

even in the winter, and it wouldn't hibernate." ****

"So we're tailing it in order to find its owner, right?"

"That's right."

"Its owner might have ordered it to attack those citizens, right?"

"That's possible," the woman said, holding onto her rifle. "But —"

"But?"

"No... For now, just keep following it."

"Roger that."

—

"And so, we continued to follow the wounded bear through the forest," the woman told the country chief.

The chief broke the silence of the listening crowd, "And then?"

—

The bear eventually struggled its way down into a wide valley.

There was a black opening in the slope, a makeshift cave carved out of the snow.

The grizzly slowly dragged itself toward the entrance.

From above the valley, the man said, "Master... You were right. This must be its den."

"Bring us over to the entrance, but keep it slow and at a distance."

"Roger." The man did as he was told and slowly took the truck down the slope, bringing it to rest about 20 meters away from the opening.

And then, a furious black mass came bolting out of the cave.

The grizzly.

It leaped up and down and kicked up snow as it charged toward the truck, which was several times its own size, paying no attention to the blood now pouring from the wound in its side.

Every breath the bear took was a growl.

Mustering the last of its remaining power, the bear launched into a violent ram —

Bang. Bang.

Two hard gunshots rattled the bear's vision and stopped it in its tracks.

The giant lost all strength and it collapsed forward into the snow. After that, it didn't move again.

The woman that had effortlessly shot the bear through its heart and then its brain spoke, "Let's get out. We should investigate what's in that cave." Then she grabbed the two pairs of snowshoes lying beside their seats.

"Uhh... Me too?"

"Yes. You can lead."

The man did not look happy in the least, but he grabbed his shotgun and a flashlight.

—

The man led the way into the cave, and what they found inside...

"Was it the bodies of these four?" the country chief asked?

"Correct. Please look closer," the woman said.

One of the bodyguards pushed the wheelchair forward, until the chief was sitting right up next to the bodies.

The frozen bodies hadn't decomposed at all, but because their faces were pure white, they looked like perfectly carved dolls.

The chief gave them a moment of silence before speaking, "Who were they...? Where did they come from...?"

"We don't know, but..." The woman drew something out from her coat pocket. It was a photograph, which she handed to the chief, "Please take a look."

Upon seeing the picture, the chief said, "I see..." and looked up again at the

five dead bodies.

The bodies lying frozen on the ground were the same happy father, mother, son, and daughter, all smiling in the picture.

They were all wearing distinct costumes. The father was dressed as a clown, the mother wore a dazzling leotard. The son wore flexible athletic wear. The daughter wore a cute dress.

And sitting in the middle of the picture, there was a bear.

The family was huddled around the grizzly; the son riding on its shoulder and the daughter on its neck.

"They were 'one family', is that it...? They must have been a circus troupe..."

"That's what we believe. They must have come here as part of their tour. Now please look at this." The woman pressed a matchbox-sized metal tag into the chief's hand.

The chief read aloud the engraving on the tag, "Blackie."

"Inside the cave, we found these four bodies," the woman began again.

"Mmghphph!" The restrained police captain struggled noisily, but no one paid him any attention.

"They were all laid neatly side-by-side at the cave entrance. Their limbs were covered in frost, but as you can see, their faces were completely clear."

At this point in her explanation, the chief understood, "Blackie was taking care of them, wasn't he... He must have licked their faces clean."

"There were no other bodies anywhere near the cave, including the policemen."

"He was taking care of them..." The wrinkles on the chief's face were showing clearly as he looked to the black body on the ground. "How did they die? Do you know?"

The woman answered the chief's question with a firm nod.

The male traveler crouched down next to one of the bodies and peeled off the jacket on its chest. There were scars where the frozen flesh had been

carved away.

"These are the wounds he died from. We had to make those cuts in order to extract the bullets."

The woman pulled a small chunk of metal from her coat pocket. "You hand, please."

She placed the item into the chief's glove and said, "The tip has been crushed a bit, but it's definitely a bullet. This is what one looks like after it strikes its target."

The bullet had been fired at the living man, penetrated his down jacket, torn his skin, crashed into his rib, and finally, "Uahh..." it had pierced his heart.

"This type of bullet is especially old and rare. From what I've seen in this country, the only person to use this caliber of persuader is —"

"Mmmphhh!" the man she was gazing at shrieked.

"...that man."

—

"..." The country chief thought to himself for a long, long time, sitting in the silent park. Finally, his verdict was, "If we set aside his earlier action, this bullet by itself isn't conclusive evidence. Forgive my saying so, but it's possible that it was planted by you."

The woman nodded her agreement, "Of course. That's precisely why we only removed the bullets from the man. The woman and children still have bullets left in them. We left them for your doctors to examine later."

"I see..."

"A thorough autopsy should give you the information you need. That's the end of our report on the 'job' you hired us for." And with that, the woman stepped back from the chief's vicinity.

—

"I'd like to hear your story now." The country chief turned his wheelchair, and his bodyguards removed the handkerchief from the police captain's mouth.

"Gahh!" The police captain was still being held upright by two of the chief's retainers, but as soon as his gag was removed, he shouted, "This is all a misunderstanding! I didn't do that!"

"Well obviously you'd say that," the male traveler thought. Of course, he didn't say it out loud.

"That woman is just trying to ruin me! She's some kind of devil!"

"Well, he's not wrong about that..." the male traveler thought. Of course, he didn't say it out loud.

"I killed a family of travelers? With what motive? I want these false accusations thrown out!"

"Well it's true that we never figured that part out," the male traveler thought. Of course, he didn't say it out loud.

The chief said, "In that case, you won't mind waiting for the official investigation, will you? Until it's over, you'll be restricted somewhat."

"I'd like nothing more! I'll stake my life to prove my innocence!"

"Then I hope you know you'll also need to explain why you tried to shoot our guest over there."

"...O-of course," the captain nodded, meekly.

The chief motioned for the captain to be taken away.

As the citizens and policemen look on in a stupor, the captain quietly said, "Let go of me. I can walk on my own." The retainers loosened their grip, but only slightly.

The police captain turned to the chief and said, "I've always respected you." He slowly pulled his right arm free and —

...saluted.

Then he calmly let his arm fall down to his belt buckle. From there, he drew out a knife and stabbed the man on his right through the stomach. He pulled it out and across to the man on his left, stabbing him in the face.

"Until now, at least!"

—

The police captain sprinted away from the two crumpling retainers in a mad dash toward the country chief.

"Oh boy", the male traveler said.

"...", the female traveler watched.

The captain crashed into the chief, knocking him and his wheelchair both to the ground.

The captain grabbed the chief from off the snow, wrapped his left arm around the the chief's neck, and pointed his knife at the man's right eye. "Nobody move!" the captain shouted out, and the bodyguards that had come running stopped where they were.

The captain stood upright, forcing the chief onto his feeble legs. The chief moaned against the pressure on his neck, and the captain cut a long line down the chief's cheek.

The citizens cried out as blood began to trickle down the chief's cheek, and the captain said, "No sudden moves or he dies! Everyone stay back. If anybody comes within five meters, I'll carve the old geezer's eyeballs out for you!" His voice sounded almost cheerful, but his face was stern.

—

The furious citizens continued to scream, the police pushed them back, and the bodyguards grit their teeth as they surrounded the two men from a safe distance away.

"Well, Master?"

"That saves us some time."

"'Time to investigate the captain's motives' or 'time to kidnap the chief'? Wait no, don't answer that."

"Would you prefer to take over the country or take out some of their pork?"

"The pork, obviously. It's so good."

"What a coincidence, I agree."

"I want some bacon too."

"Agreed."

"It would go so well with some fresh bread and eggs, too."

As the two travelers entertained themselves with small-talk, the man took a single shotgun slug out of his pocket and loaded it into his persuader chamber. He pumped the persuader once, back and forth, so that the slug was ready to be fired.

"Okay, here you go," he said, handing it off to the woman.

"Why thank you," she said, pointing the barrel in the direction of the chief and captain.

—

"I see... So it really was you..."

"That's right, chief. You wanna know why?"

The two conjoined men traded their own small-talk. Meanwhile, the blood pouring from the chief's cut continued to flow, staining his chest a dark maroon.

"Hey Master, wait a little," the male traveler said. "Maybe if we listen to their conversation some more, it'll save us some time."

"Understood," the female traveler said, and she halted her approach.

—

"Yes, I'd love to hear your explanation for this."

"Then listen up." The captain spun around furiously, threatening to cut out an eyeball or two if anyone was even slightly too close for comfort. "I wanted to finally be free of this country."

"What? Do you really hate your motherland that much?"

"I do, I hate it. What is there for me here? This land is worthless garbage. Our ancestors that settled here must have had absolutely nowhere else to go, or maybe they were exiled criminals. I have yearned to go out into the world since the day I was born!"

"Then why didn't you just go? I don't recall forbidding anyone from leaving."

"Oh I would love to, but it wouldn't have been possible. In the summer, everything's drowned in mud, and in the winter, it's covered in snow. It's useless to even try without a truck or something."

"So you wanted to steal a vehicle...?"

"That's right. Those people rode around in a truck with a huge cage to carry that fat bear."

"And so you killed them in the forest...?"

"Yeah. I told them I had to do an inspection before they could enter the country. I lined the four of them up, and then *bang bang bang bang*. I only joined the police force so that I could carry a gun and go outside the walls, but it actually worked out! I finally had a chance!" As the captain spoke, he saw a retainer getting ready to pounce from behind. "Cut that out," he said, and he swung his knife down across the chief's arm. The ruthless blade tore through cloth and skin, and the chief let out a "Guah!" as blood spouted from a second place.

The two travelers stayed where they were, standing at a distance, and watched in silence.

"Were you alone? You did it yourself?" The chief resolutely continued questioning the captain, even as blood poured from his face and arm. He wanted as many people to bear witness to this confession as possible.

"Of course. It's no good to get your cute little subordinates involved. Then I would have had to kill them to keep their mouths shut, and I don't want to see that."

"Oh, how noble of you."

"Yes, and that's exactly why I wanted to kill that bear so badly for eating so many of my friends!" the captain shouted, in a rare show of emotion.

"Hah! Hahaha!" the chief burst out laughing.

The policemen were all listening to this exchange too, and their faces were a conflicted mess of emotions.

"Weren't you the one that set the grizzly free in the first place?!"

"It should have been dead!" the police captain shouted, again letting his rage get the better of him. "After I was done with those four, I fired off dozens of rounds into that thing's legs while it was stuck in the cage. Then, once it couldn't move anymore, I knocked it down out of the cage. It was supposed to eat the bodies and then die, so I'd be in the clear!"

"And just look at what's happened! We've lost more than 20 innocent civilians because of that!"

"You're right, I should have just killed it from the start! I'll remember that from now on! I'll just kill anyone and anything that gets in my way!"

"So what happened to that truck?"

"I still have it stashed away in the forest. I also stored up fuel and food. I was supposed to escape on the same day that the grizzly first showed up again! I was supposed to be free!"

—

"This is looking bad...", the male traveler murmured, and jammed both hands into his pockets.

Then he slowly clenched his fingers around a hand-persuader that was hidden through a hole in his pocket.

—

"I understand it all now. You were the culprit behind all of this. As this country's chief, I will see you punished."

"Oh do whatever you want. I'm leaving this country now, anyway." The captain wiped the blood from his knife onto the chief's clothing. "I even got my hands on a brand new truck."

He glanced over at the two travelers, and then past them at their truck. "Hey you two!" the captain shouted out.

"What?" the persuader-carrying woman asked.

"I'll be taking that truck now. You two can double as my drivers and hostages,

so get that engine running. Also, I think I'd like that persuader too."

The woman replied to all of his demands with, "We refuse."

The police captain slashed the chief's left leg open. And then the right leg too. The blade sank past the clothing and formed two new rivers of blood. Then he brought the knife back up to the chief's eyes, now only a centimeter away.

The woman said, "Go ahead," and lifted her persuader.

"Huh? What'd you say?"

"I said, 'Go ahead, kill him.' I'm not a citizen of this country. I have no grudge against your chief, but I also have no duty to protect him."

"... You bitch!"

"Protecting my truck is a lot higher on my priority list," she finished, and then she stepped forward with the persuader out. The barrel was firmly squared on the chief, as well as the captain hiding behind him.

—

The crowd strummed with noise, and the chief's retainers were very noticeably anxious.

"Go ahead! Shoot!" the chief shouted, with the persuader still trained on him. With blood dripping down his face, he laughed aloud, "Shoot me along with this beast, traveler! You said yesterday that you didn't want it, but I'm offering you my life!"

The police captain stood as dumbstruck as the rest of the populace as the chief continued to shout, "Tell everyone! This traveler is not to be punished for what she is about to do! That is my final request as your chief!"

"..." The woman silently shifted her aim towards the chief's chest and took another step forward.

"Stay back..." The police captain slunk away and turned the knife to point at her.

As soon as the knife was about 10 centimeters from the chief's face, *pawhoosh whoosh whoosh*, three tiny percussive bursts sounded out.

The knife fell from the police captain's right hand, and three small holes appeared on his wrist, spilling drops of blood onto the fallen knife and the surrounding snow. "Eh?" The captain gave a confused look to the woman, who was still waiting to fire.

"Now!"

All of the bodyguards slammed into the captain at once, wrapping their hefty arms around him and pulling him off of the chief, onto the snowy ground. They mercilessly beat the captain, shouting, "You bastard!"

"Well alright!" The male traveler, who had drawn the silenced hand-persuader in his left hand and fired in an instant, muttered with deep emotion, "Finally, we can go eat that pork again."

Translator's Notes

1. [Jump up](#) ↑

"Half-serious and half-serious" is not a typo, it's a literal translation of the text.



Chapter 2 “Land of Mania -What I Want & Why I Want-“

“Welcome traveler! And motorad too! Welcome to my glorious armory!”

“Wow... So many... The wall is completely covered with persuaders.”

“It’s like the whole building is filled with them! How many are there?”

“853 rifles, 389 buckshot persuaders, 211 full-auto rifles, and 1504 hand persuaders. I have 33 eccentric ones as well; belt buckle persuaders, musical instrument persuaders, and other odd shapes. Tomorrow I receive 29 more I ordered for the collection.”

“.....”

“Woah...”

“I use all the money I earn on persuaders! It raises my spirits to know that my armory benefits when I labor.”

“I see. Working for your hobby.”

“Woow, you must make a lot of money!”

“At the beginning I was your average corporate grunt, but soon that wasn’t enough. I needed more money so I started a restaurant business. Now my chain is spread across the entire country. Feel free to drop in. Of course I’ll pay! Just give them my name and they’ll wave the cost.”

“Thank you. We’ll be sure to pay one a visit.”

“I’m worried about the restauraaant.”

“Hm, so this is your persuader. It’s an old version of the liquid gunpowder revolver and can be used to fire ammunition other than a bullet. This other persuader is well built and even has a laser sight (a device that uses a laser to display where the persuader is aimed) right under the barrel. Good idea! I’m going to copy it. This harmonica type silencer seems like it would reduce noise

significantly. It's got a slide lock mechanism so it won't make a sound when shooting a sub-sonic .22 round. And this rifle, it can be disassembled in separate parts thanks to its intricate construction. This is really interesting, I've never seen one before. How is the accuracy while sniping? I'm guessing the country that made it had amazing technology. And all these persuaders are well used, but in great condition. Holding the hand persuaders I can feel the history and the hatred!"

"Sure..."

"It probably does contain a lot of malice."

"So Kino, you mind selling one, or even all three of these fine persuaders?"

"Hey Kino! A chance to name your price!"

"Um... how about this motorad-"

"Please no!"

"I'm joking Hermes."

"Yep, I knew it."

"Really?"

"Kino, what do you think? They're perfect for my collection!"

"I'm just going to say it bluntly; I have no intention of selling any of my persuaders. It's a shame, but I can't part with them."

"It's okay, I wouldn't sell any of mine either. It would've been a nice addition, but I guess it was inevitable. Thank you for declining up front."

"It was unavoidable. Kino can't go on with the journey without them."

"What? Why? As long as you have Hermes it's possible to keep going."

"Well sure, but they're needed for other purposes."

"Hm? What? Other purposes?"

"Without them I can't protect my life or Hermes'."

"Life? Protect? Why?"

"I mean there might be people or animals that may attack us so..."

“Whaaaaaaat! S-so Kino, you shoot humans and animals? You’ve shot them before?”

“Well, of course.”

“Ahhh! No!”

“What’s wrong?”

“I can’t endure that! These wonderful gems, created from the wisdom of mankind! I can’t stomach the thought of soiling these metal works of art with the blood of others!”

“.....” “.....”

“I will never go on a journey!”

Dear Kino,

Thank you for visiting me and my collection yesterday.

I was glad to have seen your persuaders.

I know it’s a little sudden, but I’ve sent a knife type persuader.

The shop I got it from said it was rare, but I don’t want it.

The reason is because I dislike knives. I hate them. I haaaaate them!

Knives are barbarous tool that cause harm to people.

In this country more than 90% of murders are committed with knives. Just imagining such a horrific act, cutting a human alive; it makes me want to hurl. I don’t even like being in the kitchen because of them.

I was going to return it to the owner, but I thought that you may be able to use instead so I had it sent to your hotel.

As you can see it looks like a normal knife, but inside the grip are four chambers for .22 LR. When you pull the trigger, the double action mechanism allows it to shoot all four rounds consecutively.

Of course the range is very short.

I’ve also included a laser sight the size of a bullet.

You can use the laser by loading it into one of the chambers (you can only fire

three rounds then). You can also use it the same way to adjust the sight on your persuaders.

Anyways, I hope you enjoy the gift.

I hope your journey never ends!

Yours sincerely

“And that’s it Hermes. He was a strange man, start to finish.”

“You’re being too crank!”

“...frank?”

“Yes that! – So what are you planning on doing with it? The gift.”

“We should... keep the things we get for free.”

“I thought you were going to say that. You always get new persuaders, wherever you go. Pretty soon you’re going to have a 100.”

“That would be quite a pain. You’d have to pull a wagon.”

“Not the wagon! Can you buy a bottomless pouch?”

“If it exists.”

“A knife type persuader. Will you actually use it?”

“I’m not sure... Honestly, I can’t think of a use.”

“Well whatever! We can always sell it! You do need to buy winter equipment, Kino.”

“Yeah, and I want to eat more.”

“Are you going to sleep? – Remember to buy tire studs in the next country. And there’s another thing I want you to get.”

“What?”

“Skis to mount on my sides! Then we don’t have to worry about falling over in the snow!”

“Being able to drive more safely is good... but I’m surprised. I thought you hate being modified.”

“I do! But it’s better than getting stuck!”

“Alright then, we’ll get winter equipment in the next country, but before that I’m going to eat my heart out.”

“Don’t fall asleep!”

第三話

「過去のある国」

— What We Have Taught. —



Chapter 3: "Land with a Past" —What We Have Taught—

"Ruins, huh. Won't it all just be broken down?" Hermes asked.

"Maybe, but I still want to check for myself," Kino replied, as she rode.

They were in a strange land where trees were able to sprout, despite the rocky ground.

The rolling hills were dotted with broad trees poking out of the earth.

The trees grew thick branches in every direction, but they didn't carry the leaves you might expect to see on such a large tree. In truth, these cacti were large plants, but they still looked strikingly similar to regular trees.

The sky was a calm blue. At its zenith was the sun. There was hardly a cloud in sight.

The season was autumn. The air was cool, and Kino wore a coat, with a bandana over her face.

Kino and Hermes were riding west. The earth was dry rock, as hard as pavement. With no cracks or bumps, the land itself was a road that stretched out in every direction.

Kino rode Hermes at a leisurely pace, driving wide circles around any cacti in the way. "It's something I first heard about from Master," she said.

"Oh, it's from a long time back then," Hermes said.

Kino nodded, "Yeah. Master told me, 'There were incredibly beautiful ruins. The country was at the foot of a mountain, where they built waterways for the clear spring water they drew out. It was a lovely town that looked like it could still support thousands of people.'"

"Hmmm. If everything was made of stone, the town could still be around. Why was it abandoned?"

"Master stayed there for a few days to investigate it, but she never figured it out in the end."

"Wow. What did she think though?"

"If it was disease, there would still be bodies left behind, but there were no visible remains or signs of burials. If there had been some kind of conflict like a war, the country would have been destroyed, but everything was still intact. If the people migrated somewhere else, they would have taken their belongings, but those were still around, including their stores of dried meat and grains, which Master helped herself to. She said the only thing out of place was that the country gate was left open."

"Hmm. A country where all of the people vanished, leaving behind their homes and food, huh. What a mystery. It sounds like a story about an abandoned ship that I heard before."

"After that, Master went to a nearby country to ask if they knew what had happened, but they told her the abandoned country was always so isolated that the nearby country's people never even knew it existed."

"As in, no one had even gone to that country before?"

"Apparently. As you can see, the land here is all dry and hard, so no one wanted to hurt their horse's hooves by coming here. There are other places to go, and the land here is so barren with nothing but rocks, that no one ever went near the country."

"Hmm. For a motorrad though, this is the best possible terrain."

"Master thought the same thing, since she drove a car, so she was trying to take a shortcut to a different country when she ran into the ruins on accident."

"Hmm, so if it turns out that this country is still intact and deserted, are you planning to live there, Kino?"

"Who knows — That might not be so bad."

"It'd be lonely just by yourself though."

"Well I have you, Hermes."

"It'd be lonely just by ourselves though. We need to increase the population somehow, but that doesn't seem likely. If only you could talk too, 'Canon'."

"Yeah, it'd be great if you and 'Canon' got along."

"What'll you do if we get along too well and then we end up getting married?"

"I'll think of names for your children."

"Make sure they're cool ones."

Their conversation continued on like that as they rode through the desert, until —

"I see it!" "I see it!" They crested a hill and caught sight of the stone walls in the distance.

—

As Kino and Hermes neared the walls, they could see that the gates were closed.

"Huh? How do we get in?" Hermes wondered.

Kino craned her neck a bit and said, "Maybe we need to go around and enter from the other side?"

But it turned out that they didn't need to.

Once they got closer, a door next to the gate opened, and an axe-wielding guard walked out.

"What?" "What?"

—

"Traveler! Welcome! We're so glad to have you!"

"Amazing! It's been 13 years since a traveler last came to our country!"

"So that's a motorrad! This is my first time seeing one! Thank you for this valuable opportunity!"

"Take it easy!"

"Whoo — You're so hot, Traveler—! Be my boyfriend!"

The citizens greeted Kino and Hermes as they strolled through the country.

"What?" "What?" They both whispered incredulously each time.

The country's streets were lined with pristine stone houses and canals that

flowed with clear stream water.

Hermes said in a small voice, "What is all this, Kino? Isn't it just a regular country full of people?"

Kino replied in a small voice, "I don't know... Maybe they came back from wherever they went?"

"Then what if they ask us to take responsibility for the food Master took?!"

"Uh, I'd like to believe that won't happen..."

Kino and Hermes made their way to the plaza at the center of the country, where they found the inn they'd been recommended to by the gracious citizens.

—

A little while later, in the evening.

In order to welcome their first visitors in 13 years, the country was holding a festival.

The citizens opened up their reserves to provide a marvelous spread of food that could only be had a few times a year, and everyone was in good spirits to celebrate their guests.

Kino was invited by the country chief to the banquet at the country's capitol.

The chief, who appeared to be about 40 years old, described the country to Kino and Hermes.

They had a population of 5,000. They tilled the rocky soil to create arable crop fields, raised fish in the bubbling spring water, herded sheep, and once in a while, they even ate cacti. Everyone in the country seemed to live life in relative leisure.

Kino listened as she ate a piece of mutton roast, "...". She gave Hermes a short glance and then asked, "How long have you all been living here?"

The chief's response came immediately, "Excellent question! We've been here for almost 800 years now!"

—

The country's residents spoke proudly of their country's history.

800 years ago, their ancestors had migrated here as 80-odd people from some unknown place.

Through their incredible engineering, they took this barren wasteland of rocks and built it into a country.

For the past 800 years, they had not been at war with any other countries, nor had they suffered internal strife. They had simply been living their lives in peace.

They had recorded every change in their population since their founding, so they had knowledge of every person's family tree.

Kino casually, very casually, asked whether there had ever been a time when the entire population had had to leave the country.

"Of course not! We have lived our entire lives in this land, ever since we first set down roots here." All of the citizens agreed, with some of them laughing at what they thought must have been a joke.

Kino tried searching for someone that might have been alive when Master had visited, but she didn't see anyone like that in the crowd.

"How strange." "How strange."

"Did Master lie? No, I can't imagine that. She wouldn't have any reason to."

"Yeah... Are you sure you didn't bring us to the wrong place, Kino?"

"I can't say for sure that that's impossible... But it matches her description, and I can't imagine there being many other countries like this one."

"Yeah..."

Over the next two days, Kino and Hermes observed the residents' daily life and in turn, they traded stories of their own strange experiences. The citizens offered Kino delicious foods in gratitude, of which she ate too much.

The country was home to very many children, to say the least.

Couples married early and from several of them raised children, so the population was booming.

The country had limited area and food supplies, so eventually they would run into a need for population control, but they still had room to grow, at least now.

—

On the morning of the third day since entering the country, it was time for Kino to depart.

Leaving behind the huge send-off that the citizens prepared, they went through the departure procedure at the west gate.

"In the end, we never solved the mystery, Kino."

"Yep. But it was fun, so let's call it good."

"Traveler! Please wait up!"

Kino was just about ready to depart on Hermes when someone called out to them. A guard came running from the gate to stop them.

"A messenger arrived from the elder, who eagerly wishes to meet you. She's on her way here, so please, wouldn't it be possible for you to delay your departure for a bit?"

Kino had already been told that their country's oldest citizen was named their elder, so she agreed without hesitation.

"We might finally hear about the mystery!" Hermes exclaimed as he waited with Kino in the gate-side guard office.

—

An old woman of about 70 years arrived in a sheep-drawn carriage.

She was without a doubt the oldest person in the country.

She had definitely been absent during the first day's celebration. Her legs were weak, and she needed a caretaker on each side to support her as she walked.

She introduced herself as the former country chief, and Kino and Hermes greeted her politely.

Then, just as Kino was about to ask her about the past, the woman said,

"Everyone, please leave us alone for a bit."

The guards and caretakers left her side and walked a fair distance away, leaving only Kino, Hermes, and the country elder in the cramped guardroom. It was a good place for sharing secrets.

The elder, whose face was carpeted in wrinkles, wasted no time in getting to the point. "Traveler... You asked the day before yesterday, did you not, about whether our people had abandoned this land?"

Kino nodded yes.

"Are you the true heir to this land? One of their descendants?"

Kino understood the woman's meaning immediately, and answered in a serious voice, "No. I am not. Please be at ease. I didn't come here to survey the country so I could reclaim it. I swear from the bottom of my heart that this is the truth."

The tension very obviously drained from the elder's body.

"Kino is completely unrelated! Just a simple traveler! She happened to know another traveler that came here several decades ago, who explained the country's situation," Hermes said, and Kino laid out everything she knew for the elder.

"I see..." the elder sighed in relief.

Kino said, "So then you settled into this country after it had been abandoned, right?"

"Yes, that's right," said the elder, beginning her story.

Many decades ago, when she was still young, she made the journey here in a group of one hundred. Every single one of them was a criminal.

"So they were exiled from their homeland? Including you, elder?" Hermes asked, with no sense for decorum, but the elder was not shy in replying.

Yes, she had been a criminal in her homeland when she was younger. She mugged wealthy people, and she had even killed several of them, she said quietly.

They set off on their journey to escape and lost several people to starvation and infighting along the way before finally coming across this country.

They had already been to countries where they had been outed as criminals, as well as other countries that just wouldn't take in such a large group of people, so they feared this country would be the same — but to their amazement, the country was completely deserted.

They were so filled with joy that at that moment, they all took a vow to change their ways and cooperate so that they could live together here in harmony.

They took this new opportunity as a gift from the heavens, but they lived in constant fear that the true residents would someday return and force them to leave.

Once the elder had finished her story, Kino said, "I understand that the country was already abandoned when you settled, and then your children populated this country even further, but the one thing I don't understand —"

"— is the history that everyone believes now, right? About 800 years ago," Hermes finished.

They thought the elder might not answer, but she told them readily, "It's all made up."

"I see." "I see."

"When the children were born, and it seemed that we would be able to continue living here, we suddenly wanted an admirable past. Committing crimes, being exiled, wandering from country to country, and then finally stealing away a country for ourselves... Those weren't the stories we wanted to tell our children. So we threw away our pasts and created a fake history from square one, going back 750 years, complete with family trees. Looking back on it now, it was fun." The elder, who had been wearing a grave expression until now, smiled just a little.

"I see..."

"So how did you decide? Did someone go and write a novel?" Kino asked.

The elder shook her side from side to side, "No, we all came up with it together. We decided based on whoever was loudest."

"Hah?" "Huh?" Kino and Hermes asked together.

"Whoever was loudest. We gathered everyone up, and then the chairman would start, 'Today we're deciding what happened 398 years ago. What happened in the winter?' and then everyone would yell things out. 'A ton of black sheep were born!' or 'It rained for seven days, and then a huge rainbow came out!' or 'A man named xxxxx built a new canal!'"

"And then?" "And then?"

"The chairman listened to everyone, and whatever they decided was the loudest became our official history. We carved it into stone tablets and taught it to the children. 'You were born into this country with a proud, 700-year history.'" The old woman smiled. It was a sad, bitter smile. "As the years passed, even those of us that made it up began to forget what was real and what wasn't. It was forbidden to write the truth anywhere, and we continued to teach our children lies... And now I'm the only one left that remembers what truly happened when we settled here."

Kino and Hermes listened to her confession in silence.

"And I don't have much time left. Soon no one will know the truth. The... The people that built this country, the people that saved us, if their children ever return to say, 'This is our country,' what will our children do in response to their legitimate claim? But there's... there's nothing left that I can do. I cannot return to the past that I've already thrown away. The true past can't be revealed without erasing the false past. What we've done to our children is irreparable."

Finally, the old woman said to the travelers with a sorrowful smile on her face, "Even if it's just the two of you, please remember what really happened. Remember that I was a criminal."

And then, Kino and Hermes left, with the elder and the guards seeing them off.

They had no trouble riding over the hard rock, and soon the country walls disappeared into the distance.

Hermes spoke up, "What do you think, Kino? Will you remember everything about that country and that woman until you die?"

Kino stared hard at the far-off cacti and rocks on the horizon, "I don't know about that... Of course I won't forget it anytime soon, but I don't think I can remember until I die."

"Yeah... You know, that woman will die worrying about the country's true citizens coming back, couldn't you have told her one little lie?"

"Hm? Like what?"

"Like, that a terrifying traveler known only as 'Master' lost her temper and slaughtered everyone in the country, so there was never a chance of them returning."

"With Master, that's possible... What if that's what actually happened?"

"So?"

"'So?'... I'm no good with lies."

"But if you keep lying, even they'll become true history someday. Just like that country."

"Well, I guess — what makes something 'true history'?"

Hermes replied immediately, "When everyone believes it's true, right?"

Kino had to think for a while before agreeing, "... Well, I guess."

After riding in silence for about 30 seconds, "Kino, you should make up some history too!" Hermes said excitedly.

"What?"

"If you come up with a cool backstory for yourself, you can live your life saying, 'Hey, I am heir to a long, proud history.' You can boast about it in all the countries we visit! Say you're really a princess from some distant land and you're filthy rich! Why don't we start doing that from now on?"

Underneath her bandana, Kino made a weird frown^[1] and said, "No. I don't need that kind of beautiful made-up past. I'm okay with just living and traveling like this. — What about you, Hermes? Do you want that kind of beautiful past?"

"Not really, but I'll take what I can get."

"Okay, then I'll come up with one for you."

"Oh! Please do! Do it!"

"The motorrad Hermes —"

"Yeah, yeah?"

"— always rises at the crack of dawn in record time, without needing anyone to wake him up. He's so good that I don't even need an alarm clock."

"..."

"Is something the matter, Hermes, o ye of early rising?"

"Oh stop, that's ancient history. These days I'm nothing more than a simple motorrad."

"That's not true! I know you can do it if you try, Hermes! Come now, think back to your past! Starting tomorrow, I want you to believe in yourself."

"Uhh, okay, I don't need that kind of backstory."

"See?"

The motorrad rode on over the rocky earth.

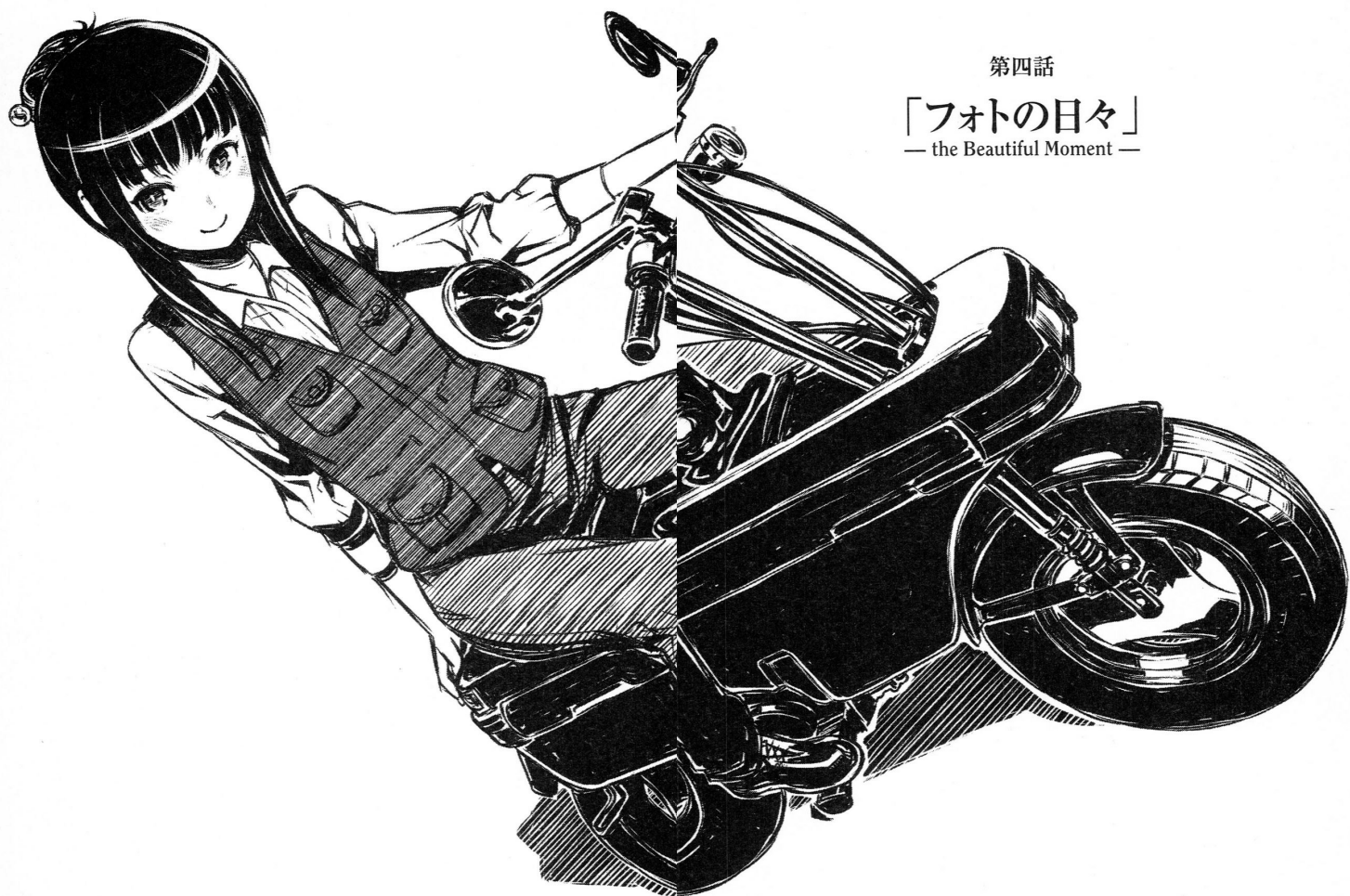
Translator's Notes

1. [Jump up](#) ↑

In the original Japanese, it says that Kino shaped her mouth into a ^ shape. See also: "henohenomoheji"

第四話

「フォトの日々」
— the Beautiful Moment —



Chapter 4: "Photo's Days" —the Beautiful Moment—

"Since That Day" —Since I was Born.— [\[1\]](#)

Why are motorrads (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only note that it cannot fly) born? No one knows.

Why can they talk?

Why isn't anyone surprised that they can talk?

Since no one knows why in the first place, no one finds it strange not to know.

I don't know either, even though I'm the one writing this.

Even though I'm a motorrad too.

"Sou, I'm back!"

I was dozing by the window in the peaceful spring sunshine, when the owner of this tiny little room flung the door open and came marching back in.

The owner was human.

Sex: Female.

Age: 17.

Her long black hair was tied behind her head, but now she pulled out her hairpin, and her hair swooped down to her back.

She was wearing work clothes without the slightest hint of sex appeal, although they did look easy to move around in: jeans and a long-sleeved shirt under a vest that was covered in pockets.

She dumped an aluminum box from off her shoulder onto the bed.

The box contained several single-lens reflex cameras, as well as alternate lenses and film.

"Oh hey. Welcome back, Photo," I said.

Her name was Photo.

Obviously not her real name.

It was just a nickname, but that's what everyone in this country called her.

She —

never had a name when she was a slave, and no longer has the name she had before then.

—

I've never met anyone with a fate as strange as Photo's.

If you searched the whole world over, I'm sure you could find people that are more amazing, as well as people that are more amazed, but I'm not about to go looking.

She was an orphan.

She had parents and a grandmother when she was young, but around the time she could have started school, they were killed by an epidemic, one after the other.

Her country was ruled under a single religion, which also ran the orphanage. And that's where Photo was raised for almost 10 years.

As long as you followed the doctrine closely, you'd be able to live a long life in that country, raise children, and then eventually die.

And that was how Photo was (of course, that wasn't her name back then). She was raised as an obedient "good girl" who was never anything except prim and proper.

However, she ended up leaving the country for a wonderful reason.

I thought it was just for motorrads, but it turns out it can happen to humans too.

That is — she was sold.

One day, the leader of the country, whom the people called the "high priest", came up a bit short while trying to pay some merchants for a few things. The country was known for its gem mining industry, but they were having a bad year.

Of course, the merchants weren't interested in giving hand-outs, and they made it clear that they wouldn't be selling their goods for less than full price.

The high priest was in a tight spot.

I'm only guessing, but whatever he was buying, he probably needed it to impress or control everyone else. He might even have needed it just to stay in power.

So the high priest offered Photo as part of the trade. Like, "Use her as a servant."

I don't know why Photo got picked, but ironically enough, she's a hard worker.

"If these gems aren't enough for you, what if I add this girl?" that wonderful priest proposed. Photo, for her part, quietly consented to being a servant.

It sounds okay when you say "servant", but really, she was a "slave".

And so, Photo was loaded onto one of the merchants' trucks and taken out of her country, about a year ago now.

The merchants used Photo as a slave.

There was the chief and his family, and then their subordinates and their families, which added up to 30 merchants and 3 trucks in total. They worked Photo like a draft horse and bullied her for amusement.

The abusive language was constant, and if they felt like it, they'd hit her once in a while too. She wasn't fed nearly enough.

So what did Photo do in such an awful situation, you ask? — She just kept working as hard as she could.

You see, she's a complete idiot.

In the country she comes from, pretty much everyone believes in unrealistic, childish sayings like "The world is one family" and "Love will save the world."

They believed that they were so full of love that their country was the most beautiful in the world.

In reality, it was all the high priest's dictatorship, but it's hard to see that from

the inside. Anyone that did notice it probably joined up with the priest to get their share of the pie.

And so, Photo believed that life would be wonderful as long as she always did her best to trust people, never doubted them, never tricked or hurt them, and always loved them as her neighbors.

Even after she taken from her country as a slave, Photo still tried her best to work as hard as she could.

The merchants laughed in her face for it.

And honestly, I did too.

Like, "She gives idiots a bad name."

Like, "She won't last long out in the real world."

—

But wow — humans' lives are a real mystery. Like they say, "No one knows what the future holds."

This was a few days after Photo became a slave.

The merchants set up camp on a mountain above the clouds, and then something hilarious happened.

They used some of the plants growing nearby for cooking, and everyone dumbly ate it up. That plant is fine for cooking when it's growing on flatland, but at higher altitudes, it's poisonous.

Well, I guess it would have been even dumber if they did know and didn't notice.

It was a small mistake, but a fatal one.

Everyone that ate it went into a seizure and died. Photo was the only one left alive.

And actually, she tried to eat it too.

The idiot could have just let it happen, but she realized at the last second that it was poisonous, and tried to warn them all. Like, "Wait don't eat it!"

But she didn't.

Well — maybe it would be better to say that "she hesitated for a second and couldn't", but anyway, some stuff happened and in the end, she was the only one left alive.

She seemed shaken up about it for a while, but who cares?

All the merchants dropped dead and Photo got her freedom.

—

I met Photo for the first time in the back of a truck.

The merchants were only keeping me around until they could sell me, but they hadn't been able to find any takers for a while.

You better not say it's because I'm a small, folding-type or that I'm weird.

I was cooped up in the truck the whole time, so that was my first actual look at Photo.

She was 155cm tall, maybe? She wasn't especially fat or skinny, but being a slave for a few days had made her thinner than normal.

Her hair was black, ragged, and tied behind her head. If she let it down and brushed it properly, it'd be pretty long.

So anyway, I basically got my freedom at the same time as her.

Then, since I didn't want to get left behind, I taught Photo how to drive a truck. And then we dipped right out of there.

Oh, and also I told her to load up the truck with anything we could sell.

Photo went crazy and said no, it was stealing. It was really tough to talk her down, but eventually I said, "Think about it. Couldn't you use that money to help someone in need?"

Finally, after she heard that, she went along with it.

I was actually talking about her, but I don't know if she got what I meant.

I directed and Photo loaded, until the truck was full of all sorts of stuff.

The other two trucks were a camper for the chief's family and a truck for the

merchants' daily living, so we didn't need them, we just took the cargo truck.

We took food and fuel from the other trucks, and jewelry off the dead bodies. We also grabbed a few dangerous-looking persuaders (Note: a persuader is a gun), as well as ammunition.

Photo ditched the old rags she was wearing, and pulled on some movable clothing from out of the merchandise. A long-sleeved shirt, jeans, and a hat with a brim. She kind of looked like a rich girl on an adventure.

Then Photo started up the truck, and I hoped her dangerous driving didn't get us killed.

—

After that we had quite an adventure.

In order for Photo to survive, and for me to not get left to rust — the first thing we had to do was make it to any country with people living in it.

Obviously, we weren't about to go back to her home country.

If possible, it'd be best to avoid the nearby countries too. If word got out about Photo's situation, that crazy priest might try to come after us, saying, "She belongs to our country!"

We drove the truck over the rough gravel path for several days.

We figured that if we stayed on the road long enough, we'd eventually run into a country somewhere. Along the way, there was a fork in the road, and we just had to trust Photo's gut.

The journey was carefree like that sometimes, but it was also insanely dangerous at other times.

Like, a girl traveling without anyone else, just a loaded cargo truck, is the best kind of prey.

If I saw anyone that looked like a thief — no, any adult that looked even slightly capable of doing harm — well I wouldn't be able to save her anyway.

Even in the best case scenario, she'd be a slave again. In the worst case, she'd be dead.

I decided that if that happened, that was just her fate.

I just want to point out that I did try to plan for that, at least a little, by offering to teach Photo how to use a persuader. But she flat out refused.

Considering how the last merchant died, I suppose that's understandable. Also, I gave it some more thought and changed my mind; even if I taught her how to shoot, that wouldn't immediately make her battle-ready, so I dropped it.

There was no one else with us on the road, so Photo and I talked a lot.

I'm the one who came up with Photo's new name.

After racking my nonexistent brain, "xxxxx•xxxxx" is what I decided on.

And Photo even liked it, at first —

—

It's been thirty days now since Photo got her freedom.

We've been on the road the whole time, except for one day when it was raining too hard to see anything.

I was in the truck bed the whole time, and Photo was in the driver's seat the whole time. It's not like we could switch, anyway.

Photo wasn't getting any better at driving, but she desperately kept herself going. She cut down on meals (usually one meal a day). At night she slept lying down in the driver's seat.

We drove somewhere from 100 to 200 kilometers every day for 12 days. Somehow, we managed to make it pretty far.

We came down from the mountain and passed through desert plains, and then we came to the edge of a huge lake and followed the huge river from there. On our journey under the constantly changing sky, we saw a lot of different animals.

Photo was really enthusiastic about everything she saw. Since I could only see out of a small window in the back of the truck, she described it to me.

"If only I could capture this scene in a picture..." Photo said, longingly.

"It's no big deal if you wanna stop and draw it," I said.

But Photo responded sadly, "I've never drawn before. I don't know how... it's fine."

—

The pretty scenery was great and all, but as we went farther and farther, our fuel supply continued to dwindle.

The merchants had attached massive fuel tanks to the truck's frame in case they had to cover long distances, and we'd taken the spare fuel from the other two trucks before we left, so Photo was able to refuel our truck several times.

But still, we were starting to run out.

If we were to run out of gas out in the middle of Mother Nature, Photo's luck would run out too.

At that point, we were in the middle of a gigantic forest. The only color you could see was the early summer green. The weather was good, and it was the morning of the 14th day.

Thankfully, the dirt path was dry and not too bumpy. The climate wasn't bad either.

I said to Photo, "Hey, listen up. Today's the breaking point. If we run out of gas, you should take whatever you need and keep walking by yourself. You should be able to get a few kilometers farther at least, before you run out of food and water. Don't give up until the very end! Keep fighting to survive for as long as you can! You can do that right? And — you can just forget about me!"

My speech was good enough to move anyone to tears, if I do say so myself, but Photo's response was, "Sou! I see something!"

She was pointing at the walls of a country, making me look like a big dumb clown. Ahhh, so lame.

With the very last of our fuel, we just barely made it there to the country.

"We did it! A country! We didn't have to leave Sou behind after all!" I thought to myself.

This kid, Photo — Like, maybe she was just born with naturally good luck? Like, maybe she's blessed by the god of fortune?

Nah, I changed my mind, but after we got to the country, I understood.

It wasn't over yet.

—

Just making it to a country didn't mean that we were safe and sound.

It could be a country with corrupted roots, like Photo's birthplace, or a country that was tangled up in a civil war.

Or maybe they would find some reason or another not to let us in.

We could only see the walls from outside, so who knows, maybe everyone inside the country had died already.

Even if it was an awful place, if we could at least get in and find living people, we could buy more fuel and go on to the next country. At the very least, we still had a truck full of valuable merchandise.

But if it was a country without science or technology, they might not even use engines. In that case, we wouldn't even be able to get fuel.

"Still, if that happens, I can just help work in the fields! I'll work as hard as I can!" Photo exclaimed cheerfully from the driver's seat. Okay, so that's fine for her, but then what about me?

What's a motorrad without fuel? Decorative furniture? Not funny.

"Sorry, Sou... For you, being ridden around is what makes you happiest, right...? Sorry."

I didn't ask you to look like you're gonna cry on my behalf.

But I did keep on praying that they we could get fuel.

Anyway, in the end, yes, they had fuel.

First of all, it was a huge country. The walls went all the way around the country in a circle, but the wall looked like it went in a straight line.

As we got close to the gate, a guard came out and ordered us to stop.

When I heard from Photo that he was wearing a uniform and carrying a rifle, I relaxed a bit. At the very least, we were dealing with people that knew what a

persuader was.

The guard was completely taken by surprise to find that Photo was the only person in the huge truck. I mean, that's understandable.

Photo shut up and let me talk, like we agreed on beforehand.

I said that for various reasons, Photo and I were merchants, and we were hoping we could enter the country to trade.

I was afraid that if we suddenly said, "Hey, we're drifters. Please let us live in your country," they'd refuse to let us in.

They made us wait for a long time, but they eventually decided to let us in, at least for now. We were told that there was a marketplace in the center of the country, and to go there.

They said that because the country's so big, they'd send a guard along to show us the way and — Oh bravo! They brought a small four-wheel-drive out of a garage. So they have fuel.

I immediately begged the guards to sell us some fuel. We traded away a beautifully engraved knife that we took off one of the dead merchants. We probably came out behind on that trade, but at the moment, getting fuel was more important.

We started the truck and followed the squad car into the country. The road cut through fields of crops.

The earth had been packed and hardened, and then paved with stones. There were a few other cars on the road, but Photo had gotten used to driving enough by now that she was able to stay in her lane.

—

But seriously, it was a big country.

It was still morning when we started driving to the country center, but it was already evening by the time we arrived. Honestly, I was amazed.

Looking out at our surroundings, they were decently advanced, I guess.

The level of technological development in our world is so different depending

on the country, so some countries have computers everywhere, and some countries don't even have combustible engines.

We did see cars driving around, but they weren't totally commonplace yet. Farming machines were still pulled by horses and oxen, and there didn't seem to be many cars for individual use.

The country was massive, and there were a few large buildings here and there, but most of it was farmland. Well, at least they probably had plenty of food to spare.

If you were wondering whether the country was entirely flatlands, there were several rivers, a few large lakes here and there, and some pretty tall mountains, so the view never got boring.

Photo's eyes went wide as she looked around at the fresh scenery. During the journey, she had seen plenty of nature and wildlife, but there hadn't been anyplace like this with people living in it.

"This country is so big and pretty," Photo muttered, more than once.

We passed through a few towns (I kept mistakenly thinking maybe this is the country center), and took several breaks. As night started to fall, we finally made it to the center, which was definitely the largest town yet.

As we came to the center of the country, the number of cars started to increase, and there were even street lights. The country was so spacious that there were no high-rise buildings, but Photo was impressed by a dome building that might have been a military base. She said in amazement, "I didn't know humans could build such big buildings, Sou... Wow..."

—

At about that time, I said doubtfully, "It's not bad... I guess."

Photo wanted to try to settle down if we found a good country, and during the journey, she had asked me to make the final call.

I wasn't sure yet whether it was a good country.

I could tell that it was a lawful country by how clean the towns were. A country that isn't dirty or unnaturally clean is an orderly one.

There was no civil unrest, there didn't seem to be a huge wealth gap between the rich and the poor, it wasn't overpopulated, and with all of the farmland, there wouldn't be any food shortages.

Suddenly finding such a perfect country like this — isn't this some kind of trap?

I was very seriously thinking all of that through, which isn't like me.

—

We were brought to an area by the side of the main road, which stretch out, long and narrow.

It was what you'd call an "open-air market", but right now, all of the tents, all of the chairs and tables were folded up and put away, and there was no one in sight. Not business hours, I guess.

We stopped the truck and waited, and then stomp stomp stomp, a group of about 20 people came up to us. They were all adult men and women.

Since they seemed like they wanted to talk, I had Photo bring me down from the truck for the first time in a few dozen days.

My handles were folded up, so I just looked like a box on wheels, and everyone around us looked puzzled.

A tall, middle-aged man with a business suit and a beard introduced himself as one the country's politicians. Now, I don't know why there was a politician hanging around the empty marketplace, but he began by asking us, "I beg your pardon, but how exactly did a single girl and a motorrad become traveling merchants without so much as a convoy?"

Well, of course he'd be curious. It's a pretty weird situation. I can understand why people might not want to buy anything from such suspicious merchants.

I already had a cover story made up for when we got asked this.

In order to prepare her for being independent, Photo's parents had sent her on a trial run to see how well she could do on her own. Her parents were waiting outside the country with a convoy, and would meet up with her again after she left the country.

Another advantage of this story is that it might help prevent people from trying to attack Photo and steal our stuff, since they'd be afraid that the rest of her group would find out.

Okay, time to focus hard and tell the story.

"I'll tell you everything! Everyone died!"

Hmm?

"I was the merchants' servant, and all of the merchants died from a poisonous plant!"

Who said that? Who told them the truth!? — Of course, it could only have been the black-haired little girl standing next to me. Photo.

"Wha —"

I was speechless. Like, why did she have to be so stupidly honest about everything?

If you say that, they might just steal all of our stuff right here, you know? If you say, "I found this", there are plenty of assholes in the world that will just respond with, "Then you won't mind if I steal it."

Even if it wasn't something you found, there are still lunatics that will try to justify it like, "This was mine from the start."

But it was already too late. The old man that called himself a politician said, "Oh...? Please, tell us more."

His face seemed kind at first glance, but his eyes were twinkling suspiciously as he pulled up a chair for Photo. Clearly, he was ready for a long story.

Ah boy... Don't blame me.

Even after we walked so many fine lines just to get here, we might've tripped into the bottom of the abyss right at the very end.

—

I didn't bother talking anymore, and Photo went into full detail about everything.

Not a single lie. Everything. Even how she hesitated to save the merchants at

the last second.

After she finished her story, she said, "The truck, the merchandise, none of it was mine to begin with, so I want to offer it to everyone in this country. In exchange, please allow me to live here. Anywhere is fine, and I'll work as hard as I can."

Wow...

She'd throw away all of that profit, just for that?

If you sold everything in the truck at a reasonable price, you could be insanely rich, you know?

If this is how stupidly honest she really is, it might actually be a serious illness, I thought. Hasn't she ever heard the phrase "Nice guys finish last"?

I was so flabbergasted that I didn't even have the energy to be mad. Oh sure, just do whatever you want.

And then Photo opened her mouth one more time, "And please give Sou to someone that will cherish and ride him."

Still worried about me, of all things... You're gonna make me cry.

—

The old politician and everyone else gathered around us had been very seriously listening to Photo's story in silence the whole time.

Once Photo was done with her grand speech, the politician turned to me. "Do you have anything to say?"

"Nope. It's just like she said," I said, carelessly.

"Okay then. All of these goods will be seized. They'll be sold off and the profits will go to the national treasury. We'll give you a small finder's fee. Take that and leave." Well, that's what I expected him to say, with a calm look on his face — but I was wrong.

"I see. That explains the mystery then."

Huh?

"Since you've told us the truth about everything, it's only fair that we tell you

the truth as well."

What truth?

"The merchants that owned this truck used to visit our country quite often too. We knew them personally. They were actually scheduled to come here a few days prior. As soon as you arrived here alone, we knew that something unexpected must have happened."

Wait what?! So they knew from the start?

"So, if you had stolen these goods from them somehow — well, there would have been more than a little trouble."

Uhh...

"But I see now that it was actually their own mistake that did them in. All you did was pick up what they left behind. Since all of them died and since you're the ones that brought those goods here, they are yours, and — you have the right to sell them just as they would have."

And?

"In order to help you sell those goods, I propose that we hold an auction. Of course, we will take part of that as sales tax, but the rest of the money is yours to do with as you wish. If you pay your taxes and follow the rule of law, then I see no reason not to let you live here. How's that?"

"...?"

Photo didn't seem to understand any of that, so I broke it down for her, "Basically, you can live here and you can also get really rich!"

I guess nice guys do alright for themselves — once in a while.

—

From there, several things happened one after another.

First, the details of Photo's story were made confidential under the country's laws. This country had radio and newspapers (not television yet), but all press coverage was strictly controlled.

There were two reasons for this.

First, to hide the fact that Photo was rich.

Photo's immigration was approved, so she became a citizen, and at the same time, she became very wealthy. We decided it was best to keep that a secret, just in case.

Second, so that if a friend of the merchants happened to come through, they wouldn't try to claim ownership of the merchandise.

It wouldn't have been possible to try to take back the things that the citizens had bought. The people that were gathered at the empty marketplace with us did their best to keep it secret. There were some cool people in this country after all.

The auction was a huge success.

Everything sold at a pretty good price. Nothing was left unsold.

The price of the gems and precious metals in particular made me grin.

A lot of them were the merchants' personal items that they had on them. For Photo, who was hesitant to pull them off the dead bodies in the first place, especially while they were soaked in spit and blood, selling them off made her look especially uneasy.

The truck we traveled in was bought by an automobile company.

It seems they wanted the truck in order to disassemble and study it, in order to mass produce it, since it runs so well. Disassembling it would also keep any friends of the merchants from asking the wrong questions.

Before the auction happened, Photo and an employee from the auction company were listing the items for sale, when I said, "If you're willing to listen to a single request from a motorrad, can I ask you not to list me for auction? I have a feeling that this braindead little girl still needs an instructor. That would be me. I think I need to hang around her for a little while longer."

Photo's eyes went wide in surprise, but the auctioneer agreed in stride.

"Oh, and one more thing. There are 3 silver-colored boxes near the rifles, you can leave those off the list too. The girl's going to need them in the future."

Photo scratched her neck. She didn't know what was inside them, after all.

—

Once the auction was over, Photo opened a bank account and then transferred over the taxes and commission fees all at once.

I checked around to see what living costs in this country were like, so I already had a sense of it, but still, the amount in her bank account was enough to make me grin.

Basically, Photo had enough to spend the next 10 years living in luxury. If she lived more modestly, make that 30 years.

"No way! Just goofing off all the time? There's nothing good about that!"

Photo was genuinely mad.

"So you're just not going to use it?"

"Then — I'll donate it! Who should I talk to about that?"

"Stop, you moron! Just calm down. Let's think about how to use it, okay? Don't just spend it however you want! Umm... Yeah, because I helped you earn that money, remember? So you can't just decide on your own. And I won't decide on my own either. We have to work it out together and agree. Right?"

Finally, after she heard that, she went along with it.

Ahh, that was tiring.

—

After deciding to live in this country, we needed to find a place to live. We couldn't just stay in a hotel forever.

"If I want to help out on a farm... I think we should get someplace close to the fields."

This girl is sti-ll saying things like that?

I called up a real estate agency and picked out a nice place.

It was a one-story house for rent on the outskirts of the city center, nestled into the side of "Poplar Street".

Urban areas are too crowded, and the countryside is too empty; neither of

those would have been a good choice.

When we went to see the little four-room flat, Photo was seriously shocked.
"What are we supposed to do with all these rooms?"

Maybe she just lacks common sense.

—

Once we moved into the house and finished greeting our new neighbors (even though the houses are pretty far apart out in the suburbs), Photo and I were ready to start our new lives.

On the first day, after putting away most of our few belongings, Photo let out a cry, "I'm bored! I want to work!"

That's a weird thing to say, right? What a workaholic, this girl.

But you're barely educated, so you can't take on any hard jobs.

"Yeah, and I said farmwork was fine!"

Yeah, but why would a filthy rich girl do farmwork?

"Producing food is a really important job!"

I get that, but let it to the pros! You don't know a thing about this country's crops, so you'd just get in the way.

"I'll go work in the mines! I'm really good at finding stuff in the dirt!"

That's great, but they don't have any mines here!

"Then — I'll be a luggage carrier!"

What are you gonna carry with those flimsy arms?

"Ahhh, I just want to do some kind of work!"

How about going to school? You're still young, and you don't need to worry about the tuition.

"I want to do some kind of work!"

Oh come on.

Photo and I talked it out for a while, and then I remembered, "I know! Hey,

open up those silver boxes!" I'd forgotten all about them, with everything that had happened.

Photo looked at the big, black, SLR camera and the alternate lenses inside with a puzzled face.

"It's an optical device, so don't drop it."

"What... is it for?"

I explained what a camera was to Photo.

"It's a magic item that can capture the scenery without needing to draw a picture."

—

For a while after that, Photo went crazy with taking pictures.

I knew they sold reversal film (also known as positive or slide film) in this country, and we stocked up on a bunch of it so that Photo could focus on taking as many pictures as she wanted. Obviously, we couldn't develop them ourselves, but there were professional shops where we could have it done.

It was really tough to teach Photo everything about cameras when she didn't even know they existed — but it was fun.

Since she was such a serious-minded person, she was also really good at focusing. She learned how to use it pretty quickly. A model student.

The first time she saw the developed film with a loupe and a lightbox, she went, "It's magic... Whoa..."

She stayed hunched over the entire time.

After that, Photo became addicted to the camera, nothing but click click click. And she got better at it, too.

At the same time, she was also getting better at riding me.

Now that I was finally "owned", it would've been a shame not to get used, so I taught her that too. I'm very grateful that she had ridden a bicycle before in her hometown.

Photo took me out for a drive and snapped pictures. That was all we did,

every day.

Technically, we were just goofing off and having fun all the time — but she didn't seem to mind.

If there's something you like to do, you just want to put your heart and soul into it every day. Even Photo acted like a regular kid once in a while. That was comforting to know.

First, Photo took pictures of the country's scenery, which was full of beautiful farmland. She got tired of just that, so she started taking pictures of people and things too.

She checked the developed film with a loupe, and then chose the pictures that were well-shot or that she liked to be printed. Printing isn't cheap, you know.

We put the pictures up in the house for decoration, and for the pictures that she took of other people, she printed copies for them as thanks.

Cameras in this country were still pretty expensive, so they weren't popular yet.

The high-performance SLR that Photo had was something only used by corporations, professional photographers, and a few rich people.

Anyone would've been happy to receive such a clear and detailed picture.

Once, when Photo delivered a big print of a farming family all gathered together in front of their house, they were so grateful that they gave her way more meat and vegetables than she could eat by herself (so she gave it away to the neighbors, which they loved).

Around that time, a few requests started to pop up here and there, "Would you take a picture of me and my family for a fee?"

She agreed immediately to photograph them without even asking for thanks, making even more people happy.

The rumor started to spread, "There's a photographer on Poplar Street," and the number of clients continued to increase.

She kept taking pictures, and then the rumor became, "There's a single girl on

Poplar Street that started her own photography studio." At some point, it had turned into a store.

At that point, I pushed Photo into going to town hall to make it into an official shop and to get registered as a "professional photographer".

We put a mailbox outside our door and notified the post office. I also thought about installing a telephone, but there wouldn't be anyone to pick it up while we were gone, so I gave up on that.

Regardless of whether we were turning a profit, we'd have to pay taxes, so I hired an accountant to manage our funds. I also decided on a price for photographs so that we'd make sure to turn a profit.

"Ehh? I'm fine with just a thank-you though," Photo complained.

"What are you saying? Isn't this the 'work' you wanted so badly?" I asked, a bit snidely.

"..."

She looked more doubtful than ever before, but she didn't say anything.

—

And so, we hung a sign out on Poplar Street that said "Photography, Open for Business", and we started our shop.

We'd get a request, and then Photo would drive out with me to take the picture. It was the birth of the little girl cameraman.

Not long after that, they started calling Photo "Photo". It was the birth of her nickname.

The beautiful name I had racked my brain over, "xxxxx•xxxxx", wasn't popular at all in this country. Apparently it sounded weird, it was too long, and it was hard to pronounce. Well excuse me for being so tacky.

So they just shortened "photograph" (or "photography") down to "Photo".

Pretty much everybody called her that, so soon she started calling herself Photo too, and eventually I did too.

—

Today, Photo's going out to take photographs on commission again.

This time it's a group picture for a nearby kindergarten.

I've never met anyone with a fate as strange as Photo's.

She became an orphan, she became a slave, she failed to kill herself, she became a wanderer, she became super rich, and now she's a photographer.

She never has to worry about money, and she can spend her days doing what she loves for her job.

Once, on a mountain where poisonous plants grew, she said to one of the merchants, "I believe this is a test for my future."

I don't know if she still thinks that. And I'm not going to ask. Right now, she's happy taking pictures and the people here are happy to have her.

I was thinking about this absentmindedly and dozing by the window in the peaceful spring sunshine, when the owner of this tiny little room flung the door open and came marching back in.

"Sou, I'm back!"

Translator's Notes

1. [Jump up](#) ↑

This is a summary of and sequel to Volume 12, Chapter 10.

Chapter 5: "Land of Journalists" —How to Be a Liar—

On a certain summer day.

As Kino and Hermes were entering a country, the customs officer said, "The name 'Kino' is pretty popular for travelers, huh?"

Kino responded, "I'm not sure, but... I don't think it's that common."

"Is that so...? But your age and sex are different, so I assume you're different people." And with that, the officer gave them permission to enter the country.

"What was that about?" Hermes tilted his neck in confusion. Of course, Hermes doesn't have a neck, that was just a figure of speech.

"Who knows." Leaving it at that, Kino entered the country.

—

"Traveler, you said your name was 'Kino'...? So then — Ah, no, your height and sex are different, aren't they... I beg your pardon. Let me show you to your room." The hotel receptionist was shocked.

"Eh? Your name is 'Kino'... Oh, excuse me. You're young, and even though you look like a boy, you're actually a girl. Ahh, that startled me," said an employee when they went shopping for underwear.

"Eh! 'Kino'? Aahhh!" The children at the park asked Kino what her name was, and when she replied, they screamed and ran away at full speed.

"Hmm..."

"This is weird."

Kino and Hermes decided to get to the bottom of this mystery.

—

The next day.

Kino left early in the morning and asked a policeman for directions.

"Ahh, go straight down that road and take a right at the end. You'll see it soon," the policeman replied cheerfully.

"By the way, my name is Kino."

Once she said that, the policeman pulled out his radio and said something, possibly a request for backup.

He stared hard at them.

Kino and Hermes asked the policeman why they'd been getting that kind of response ever since they entered this country, and once he explained, they understood.

"A famous journalist from our country once wrote a book about a traveler named 'Kino'," he said.

Kino asked, "What was it like?"

"The traveler known as 'Kino' wore a brown coat, and was tall, male, and a murderer."

"A... murderer?"

"Yeah. He killed tons of people in his home country, but that wasn't enough, so he left on a journey. He would quietly kill people in the countries he visited and leave before they could catch him. A cunning and merciless man."

"Aha, so that's why everyone's afraid of Kino!" Hermes exclaimed.

"That's right. Of course, I can see that you're not him."

"Okay, but you still picked up your radio just now — That was to report in about 'Kino', wasn't it? Kino went through customs and was allowed in, you know? Is this how you treat someone that legally came into your country and hasn't committed any crimes?"

"You're right, please forgive my rudeness."

Once Hermes was done berating the policeman, Kino asked, "What was that journalist like?"

"Uhh, he's a man in his fifties that used to be a newspaper reporter. He's probably the single most famous journalist in this country. Probably everyone in

this country knows him. He's written a lot and he's also been on the radio several times."

"Where did the story about the traveler 'Kino' come from?"

"About ten years ago, he wrote a book called 'The True Face of a Murderer'. It was sensational, a huge best seller. With that, he won the nation's most prestigious journalism award, and that paved the way for him becoming a freelance journalist."

"Can you be more specific about the book itself?"

"He was able to get an interview with 'Kino' right after he came here, which he collected into a book. It was a collection of stories about 'Kino's murders that showed what goes on in a serial killer's head. He was planning to kill a bunch of people in this country too, but the journalist told him that the police here are exceptional, and advised him against it."

"Is that book still being sold?"

"Oh of course!"

"One more question. Has that journalist written any new books lately?"

"No, not really."

—

Kino and Hermes went to a bookstore, where they bought "The True Face of a Murderer", and then they went back to the hotel to read it. It was quite rare for Kino to buy a book.

Just as the policeman had described, the traveler 'Kino' had visited several countries to torture and kill people. He was a cruel, merciless man who found pleasure in the murders. He was also tall and he wore a brown coat.

Kino called the publisher on the phone and asked them to deliver a message to the journalist, "I am a traveler named Kino. Your book was very interesting, but since I happen to have the same name, visiting this country has kind of troublesome."

The publisher soon delivered a response from the journalist, "I must ask your forgiveness for your troubles. If you wouldn't mind, I'd love to apologize to you

in person at my home. At the same time, I'd also like to cover your story."

"Alright," Kino seemed happy.

Hermes asked, "Okay, time to prep. Do you have enough bullets?"

Kino laughed, "I'm not going to shoot him — I don't need to."

—

The next day, the third day since Kino entered the country.

Kino left for the journalist's house in the morning.

It was quite a splendid-looking house out in the suburbs.

There were gruff bodyguards outside the house, who did a baggage check before allowing anyone inside. They insisted on taking Kino's persuaders and knives, anything that looked like a weapon, and even her luggage.

They led Kino and Hermes to a large room, where they met the journalist. He was a middle-aged man with glasses. At his command, the bodyguards left the room, leaving just the two humans and the one motorrad.

After they greeted each other, the man thanked Kino for giving up all of her weapons, a bit arrogantly. "You know, with my line of work, there are sometimes those that seek me harm."

Then the man launched into a long speech about his life's mission, and how the pen of justice could never be broken, and whatever.

Kino half-listened for a while, and then she said, "I only came here today for one reason. I don't want you to cover my story, I want you to pay me."

"Hmm? Whatever do you mean?" The man looked at Kino with disdain.

"The book you wrote about 'Kino the Serial Killer' — I know that wasn't true."

The man's face changed when he heard that.

Kino continued, unsympathetically, "You see, he's from the same country as me. All travelers from my country introduce themselves as 'Kino'. When we visit a country and they say, 'Oh, your name is Kino too?' we can tell who has gone where, and sometimes where someone has passed away."

"..."

"The 'Kino' that fits your description returned to my country before I left, and he's not the type of person to do that sort of thing. Oh, and by the way —"

Kino took out the brown coat. Since it was summer, she didn't need to wear it, and it was neatly folded up.

"This is the coat he wore, isn't it? It's customary in my country to wear this when you leave on a journey, for the same reasons we all call ourselves 'Kino'."

"..."

"I'm not interested in exposing your lies or trying to threaten you. Actually, it's the opposite. Just like with the previous 'Kino', you can write whatever you want about me. But I want to be paid for it, just a little something I can use for travel expenses."

"..."

"Like maybe I was another serial killer, or maybe I destroyed an entire country by myself; I don't care what kind of sensational lies you come up with, so go ahead. I'll just take my payment and then leave this country. How does that sound?"

"..."

"If you aren't interested, you can just pretend this conversation never happened. Of course, like I already said, I'm not planning to go around telling people the truth. No one would believe me anyway, since I don't have any proof. I just want the same thing you do."

"...Which is?"

"Business. Lying for profit."

—

That evening.

Kino and Hermes left the country.

As they were leaving, the border guard noted, "That's a lot of luggage you've got there."

On Hermes's rear rack, there was a new cloth bag resting on top of their usual baggage.

"I bought lots of goods, like your country's outstanding pottery. I'll sell it in the next country."

"Well that's quite something."

"I just have one last request."

"What would that be?"

"I heard that your guard station here doubles as a post office. Please send these to each of your country's news companies."

Kino held out several small packages.

The guard looked a bit suspicious. "They're not... bombs or anything, right?"

"They're not, but you can check if you want. Just letters with cassette tapes. But —"

"But?"

"It might become an explosive topic."

—

Kino and Hermes talked as they drove leisurely down the road, hidden in the forest.

"Kino, I'm sorry but no more hiding recording devices in my fuel tank. It's kind of like how humans say 'I've got a frog stuck in my throat'" [\[1\]](#)

"Okay. We won't do that anymore. Next time... maybe I'll hide a bunch of cash there instead."

"Did you get that from a movie? — Do you think they'll actually report what you recorded the journalist saying?"

"I don't know. That's all up to the judgment of the news companies. If they think it'll be good for business, they'll report it, and if they think it's no good, they won't," Kino concluded.

After a little while, Hermes spoke up again, "Do you think that will — restore

the honor of a dead man?"

"I don't know," Kino responded immediately.

"Nothing's easier than badmouthing someone that's not there, huh."

"Seriously. Anyone can do it."



Translator's Notes

1. [Jump up ↑](#)

Hermes literally says "I've got a small fishbone stuck in my throat"



第六話

「犯人のいる国」

— He Had Done It. —

Chapter 6: "Land of Criminals" ~He Had Done It~

It was a time just between autumn and winter.

The forest covering the flat lands had been stripped bare by the upcoming season. Only their greying branches stretched into the sky, making it look as though they were bones set into a decorative sculpture.

The ground was completely covered in a layer of rotting leaves. Though they were at one point a carpet of bright colours and shades, they had grown faded over time.

The sky was dark and covered in a layer of clouds, dark grey streaks within reams of lighter grey. The morning sun was still hanging low on the eastern sky, but it was constantly hidden by the clouds.

And in that cold forest stood a single motorrad.

It was held upright by its centre stand. A pair of black containers hung on either side of its back tire, and a bag was tied above the wheel. Atop the bag was a rolled-up sleeping bag and a neatly folded tent.

On a tree a little distance from the motorrad hung a metal plate that resembled a cutting board. However, it was dark and uneven, as though it had been battered over and over again.

The sound of gunfire rang out through the forest, which had been bathed in silence unbroken even by the wind.

One shot.

A moment later, another.

And yet another. Three shots in a row.

Each time, in beat with the three shots, a loud metallic clang rang out from the metal plate.

After the final ring had faded with a heavy resonance--

"All right, you got them all." The motorrad said, without so much as a hint of enthusiasm.

Soon, there was the sound of feet walking over wet leaves. The sound grew louder as a person emerged from behind the trees.

It was a human her mid teens. She wore a black jacket and a long brown coat over it. She had short black hair, which was mostly covered by a hat with a small bill and earflaps. Over her hat was a pair of goggles.

In her right hand was a large-caliber revolver-type hand persuader. She walked towards the motorrad, quickly switching out magazines shaped like lotus roots.

"You're great as ever, hitting all three times from so far. Can we go now, Kino?" the motorrad asked.

The human called Kino sheathed the revolver into the holster over her right thigh.

"I'm going to practice a little longer, Hermes."

"You practiced so much yesterday, though. You left the tree a complete mess."

"Yesterday was knife practice. Today I'm using persuaders."

Kino took the metal plate she had been using as a target off the tree and hung it from a single branch.

She took off her coat, rolled it up, and put it on the seat of the motorrad called Hermes.

Kino was wearing a thick belt over her waist, from which hung several green pouches. Behind her in another holster hung an automatic hand persuader.

"You're hopeless. Okay, I'll give you the signal." Hermes said, defeated.

The metal plate hung at about chest-level. Facing it down from only three metres away was Kino, who held her hand over her right thigh, right beside the revolver called [Cannon].

There was a moment of silence.

"Now!" Hermes said without warning.

Kino wasted no time. Before Hermes could finish, she drew [Cannon] from its holster, at the same time raising the hammer with her thumb and pulling the trigger from waist-level.

The sound of gunfire and metal hitting metal rang out almost simultaneously.

"Still sharp." Hermes commented. Kino holstered [Cannon] again.

And yet again, there was another series of near-simultaneous signals, gunshots, and impacts.

Kino repeatedly practiced quickly shooting down a potential enemy in her path.

For her final shots, she raised the hammer in succession with her left hand for two consecutive shots. The two rounds hit almost exactly the same point on the target.

The sounds of gunfire practically blended into one another, making it sound as though she had only fired once.

Practice was over.

"I'm almost done. Give me a minute."

Kino took out her earplugs and began to load [Cannon].

She filled the magazine with sticky green liquid gunpowder and .44 caliber rounds. On the opposite side she inserted the cartridge primer.

Kino expertly and cautiously loaded eighteen rounds--three magazines' worth of ammunition--and inserted one of the cylinders into [Cannon]. She pocketed her backup cylinder.

"We're almost at the next country. Did you really have to practice with live rounds today?" Hermes complained.

"That's *exactly* why I was practicing today. Master always told me that you were more likely to be attacked inside a country than outside one."

"Huh. But isn't that just because there's more people inside of a country? And because your Master's who she is?" Hermes asked.

"Well... Maybe you're right." Kino did not even try to defend her Master.

Once she had finished loading her weapons, she took the metal plate back. She also collected the rounds that had fallen onto the leaves or gotten stuck onto the plate so that she could melt them down and use them again.

Kino put the metal plate and her tools into a black box. She then carefully made sure that she had not left anything behind.

She scanned her belongings and felt at them with her hands to make sure that her all-important gear and possessions were in place. Checking her luggage carefully was a necessity, seeing as there was no guarantee that she would ever return to that same location again.

She pulled out yet another persuader, this time from the holster at the back of her waist, called [Woodsman]. She checked that it was loaded, put the safety on, and holstered it again.

Finally, Kino put on her coat and buttoned it up. The long edges of the coat she secured by rolling them around her thighs.

She climbed onto Hermes and started the engine. The sound loudly roared through the chilly forest.

After spending some time warming up the engine, Kino began to ride through the forest on Hermes. After some time driving on soft dirt, they came to a large road.

It was a dirt road that stretched on in a straight line. The earth was firm, likely because it was used very often by a large number of people.

Kino put on her goggles and sped up. She rode through the grey forest, towards the western horizon.

Speeding up, she drove on relaxedly.

"Master really taught you well, Kino, but that only applies to your fighting skills." Hermes commented.

"You're right. Fighting in a group with allies is completely different from fighting on your own." Kino answered matter-of-factly. Hermes asked why that was the case.

"You see, when I'm fighting alone, there's something I don't need to concern myself with, whether I'm fighting one person or a group of people."

"Really? What's that?"

"Where I aim my persuader. When I'm fighting with people on my side, I always face the risk of accidentally shooting down one of my allies."

"I get it."

"That's why militaries spend a lot of time training their soldiers to keep their persuaders pointed away from their allies, even while they're moving. Anyone who can't do that is kicked out, because no one's willing to fight alongside them."

"I guess in that sense, fighting alone is easier."

"Yeah. It means you can fire at will even in the middle of a pitched battle. You have to be careful that your bullets don't get deflected against anything, but even then, it depends on the type of rounds you use. I don't use penetrating rounds, so I don't have to worry about it."

"You only use soft lead rounds, huh."

"I think that's also why Master kept using her old revolver, even though it lost her some of the edge in battle. Although it's also true that [Cannon] can take all kinds of rounds and that it's easy to find ammunition and gunpowder for it. It takes nonlethal rubber rounds, or even slugs for shooting down birds. And if I have nothing else, I can even fire small nails out of it. Though I wouldn't do that unless I was willing to risk getting the rifling damaged in the process."

"Oh, I get it."

"Master always took on dangerous missions with a smile-I think she did, anyway. Anyway, she took on a lot of dangerous missions. That's why she used all kinds of different persuaders, depending on the situation. Have I ever told you about the time she and her Apprentice took down a bear in a forest in the middle of winter?"

"Not yet. Tell me!"

"Okay. So I guess I'll start with how she got her hands on a truck..."

Kino and Hermes continued on their way, laughing over terrifying tales of the past.

It was just past afternoon that Kino and Hermes arrived at the gates.

A great wall stretched on to their left and right like a concrete dam. It was a very large country surrounded by powerful fortifications.

Kino registered for a three-day stay with the gatekeeper. She and Hermes were led to an outpost by the gates, where a police officer who also served as an immigrations officer asked her all kinds of questions.

"I will grant you entry to our country. However, there are certain laws you must keep in mind, for the sake of public safety. Could you give us some of your time?" The officer asked. And so Kino was forced to listen to a long explanation about this country's criminal laws.

One of the laws was that 'A civilian may possess a persuader for the purposes of sport and/or self-defence. However, should he or she ever have a need to have a persuader in his or her possession in public, the persuader must remain out of sight'.

"You don't have any pockets for your persuaders, huh, Kino? This might get pretty hard for you. Is this a safe country?"

The man explaining the laws to them, who was a thin man about forty years of age, pushed up his glasses and answered Hermes' question.

"I'll be frank with you. The crime rates here are nothing to be proud of."

"Oh?"

"Downtown is especially terrible when it comes to safety. That's where all of our economic functions are located, you see. And we get all sorts of violence happening down there. Drugs, prostitution, murders, et cetera. The police and the government's doing their best, but this country's just too big and crowded. Don't expect the cops to always be around to save you." He said, an ironic statement for a police officer.

"I understand. This wouldn't be the first time I've entered such a country." Kino answered.

"Should anything happen to you, prepare to fight for your life."

This time, the answer came from Hermes.

"You might want to tell that to whoever tries to attack Kino."

"Finally."

"That felt like forever."

The afternoon was already halfway over by the time Kino and Hermes managed to enter through the gates, after the long-winded lecture on the country's laws.

Kino undid the holsters under her coat, persuaders and all, and put them in her bag.

"Let's go."

"Yeah."

Kino and Hermes sped across fields that had recently come under the harvest sickle. Their destination: The city centre, where they could find a hotel.

Riding along the hard dirt paths, Kino and Hermes took in the sights of the country, trying to learn more about it.

There were power lines and electric lamps, which meant that this country had electricity. Seeing as there were antennae sticking out of residential buildings, this country might even have television broadcasts.

There were tractors and cars, but they were rather out of date compared to many other countries they had visited. But Kino would probably have no trouble acquiring fuel.

The outskirts of this round country were mostly used for agricultural purposes. The closer they got to the city centre, the more buildings they came across. As they slowly approached the central district, they could see buildings ten to twenty storeys high clustered together.

Passersby glanced at Kino and Hermes curiously, but no one followed after them excitedly, likely meaning that travelers and merchants were not unusual in this country.

Kino and Hermes finally entered the bustling city centre.

Stone buildings lined the streets. The narrow road was made of concrete and stone in equal proportions. The tall buildings looming overhead made everything feel cramped and unwelcoming.

It was only after a rather long drive that Kino and Hermes arrived at the hotel to which they had been introduced. It was a building in the middle of the downtown area, overflowing with guests.

Because the next day was supposed to be a holiday here, dozens of drunken men were making a commotion in the lobby, despite the evening having only just begun.

Kino was led to the smallest room offered by the hotel. However, the fact that it was on the first floor by the exit, and the fact that Hermes could enter as well, meant that Kino was only grateful for her accommodations.

Kino propped up Hermes by his centre stand beside the bed and unpacked her belongings. She quickly washed her underwear in the bathtub, strung up a laundry line, and hung her clothes to dry.

By the time she had finished, the sky outside had gone dark. The clouds were an even darker grey.

"All right. Dinner, then bed."

Kino usually slept at sunset when she was sleeping outdoors.

"You'll get fat if you sleep right after you eat." Hermes said jokingly.

"Wanna see if that's actually true? I wouldn't mind putting on some weight every now and then."

"If a fat person heard you say that, they'd get real angry at you, Kino."

"Then I'll gain weight in secret or something. I'll be back soon, so just sit tight."

"All right. I'll take a shower or something while you're gone."

"Why don't you take one for me, too?"

With that, Kino left Hermes in her room and headed for the hotel restaurant.

She returned in a matter of seconds.

"That was way too fast, Kino. Did you remember to chew properly? Did you finish swallowing?"

"No, Hermes. I ran into a bellboy as soon as I stepped out."

"Oh? What did he say?"

"That I can't eat at the hotel restaurant."

"Why not?"

"One of those drunk customers back there called up a bunch of his friends and started a party. The kitchen's running out of ingredients."

"In other words, this is a message from the heavens telling you to lose weight. Good night, Kino."

"I think the message is actually telling me to gorge myself. As an apology, they told me about a restaurant in the area that the hotel owner also manages. They already contacted them in advance, so I can eat whatever I like, as much as I like."

"What."

"So it looks like I'll be going out for dinner. What about you, Hermes?"

"Can you walk it?"

"I could, but it's a bit far."

"All right. It's dangerous alone at night, so I'll go with you."

"I can always count on you, Hermes."

Kino put on her black jacket and her coat, and left the room with Hermes.

She wrapped [Cannon] and [Woodsman] in towels, along with the holsters, and put them in the box on the left side of Hermes's rear tire.

After sunset, the streets were clearly divided into the bustling and the silent.

There were not many large roads or developed districts, but the street lamps were keeping the city lit, and there were many people passing by on foot or by car.

However, the back alleys were mostly pitch black. Upon closer inspection, people who looked to be prostitutes or drug dealers were hanging in the shadows.

Kino stuck to the larger streets as much as possible to get to the restaurant. And thanks to the manager, even Hermes was allowed to come all the way to Kino's table.

"If you leave him outside, he'll be easy prey for vandals or thieves looking to steal motorrad parts. I'm afraid this area's a sorry sight when it comes to crime rates." The manager sighed, disapproving of the dangers in the night.

Kino ordered a salad of boiled vegetables, a fried chicken dish, and a bowl of warm noodles.

The fried chicken soon arrived at her table.

"*Karaage*, huh? It looks delicious." Kino commented. The manager looked confused.

"What might this 'Karaage' be?"

"It's a food made by adding spices to chicken and deep-frying it."

"Why, that's the first I've heard! So you mean to tell me this food exists elsewhere as well? All I know is that the manager before me created and popularized this dish. I'd always thought it was unique to our country. What a pity!" the manager said in a surprisingly jovial tone.

Kino did not leave a single crumb for her meal, relishing it with joy.

She ordered some fruit for dessert, had a cup of tea to end off her relaxing dinner, and left the restaurant.

It had not been dark for very long, but drunken men were already causing a scene in the streets. They ran into the roads, and drivers angrily sounded horns at them. Tensions were running high.

"I wish they'd all just go off to a land of drunk people." Hermes complained, stuck in unmoving traffic.

"There isn't much we can do. We'll have to take another route. Do you know how to get back to the hotel?" Kino asked.

"Of course," Hermes said. "Turn left at that corner."

"Which one? There's an awful lot of alleyways around here."

"The one with all the drunk people lying around. See that bald man over there?"

"Oh. I see him."

Kino drove as Hermes instructed.

As soon as they passed by the cars and entered the alley, they saw a middle-aged man with a shining bald head passed out on the stone sidewalk, drunk out of his wits. Kino cautiously passed by him, careful not to hit him.

As soon as they turned into the alleyway, they were blanketed in darkness.

With nothing but a headlight to illuminate their path, Kino and Hermes rode through the narrow alley, which was just big enough to fit a single car.

They went on for a short while.

"Next turn. We go right at the corner with the garbage cans. See the white cat going through the trash?"

"Got it."

Kino and Hermes turned into another corner, scaring the cat on the way.

"You should memorize this path for the next time you go, Kino. 'Turn left at the drunk bald man', and 'right at the white cat looking through the garbage'." Hermes said without a hint of sarcasm.

"I will." Kino replied in turn.

"Last one. Turn left here, past that narrow alleyway, and we'll make it onto the big street the hotel's on."

"Yeah. You're amazing, Hermes."

Kino turned into the alleyway, as Hermes instructed.

It was immediately afterwards that Hermes' headlight fell upon the form of a human lying in their path.

"Whoa."

Kino hit the brakes and stopped so she wouldn't end up running over their obstacle.

The moment she stopped Hermes, Kino realized that the person in front of her, illuminated by the headlight, was covered in red.

The person was probably a young woman. She was lying across the alley as if she was a barricade.

Her revealing attire exposed her arms and legs completely. But all of her, from her clothing, her limbs, to her face looking into the sky, was drenched in blood.

And in each of her eyes was embedded a small knife that had been driven in all the way to their handles. The body wasn't so much as twitching.

"Raise my front wheel, quick!" Hermes yelled. Kino did as she was told. Keeping both her feet on the ground, she pulled the gas lever as hard as she could and let go of the clutch. She used the rear wheel to raise Hermes' front wheel into the air.

Hermes' headlight, raised high up for an instant, illuminated a corner of the alleyway.

Standing there in the distance was a man.

He was dressed in black and looking in Kino's direction.

The man was probably in his late twenties or early thirties. He had short brown hair and handsome features. He was also quite tall and attractive.

He was also smiling.

His pearly white teeth gleamed as he grinned in their direction. A streak of red was on his face, obviously not from him.

Hermes fell back to the ground, and the light moved back down to the corpse.

Kino kicked off the ground and repeated her actions again, but it was too late.

"He got away, Kino."

The man was nowhere to be seen.

"Turn left at the alleyway with the gruesome corpse and the smiling criminal'.

You got that, Kino?"

<=>

"Normally I'd be asleep by now." Kino complained.

"It's not like you could have just gone to bed. We're the ones who found the scene, and we saw the culprit, too." Hermes said something sensible for once.

Blindingly bright flashlights lit up the once dark alley. The uniformed men who had come running at Kino's report had closed off the area, preventing onlookers from approaching. Kino was the only civilian on the scene.

There were flashes of light as officers photographed the corpse. The body was in a horrific state.

She was covered with multiple stab wounds and cuts. It was impossible to tell which attack had killed her.

Her belly had been cut open, most of her innards hanging out. Her face was covered in injuries, skin peeling off in layers and making it difficult to see what she actually looked like.

The victim's coat was neatly folded beside her.

And though Kino and Hermes had not seen this earlier, something was written on the wall by the victim's head, likely with her innards.

[Cheers to our useless police officers! Looks like you've got another victim on your hands! Hahaha!]

It was written in blood.

"So you're the traveler and motorrad who reported this to us, are you?" Someone approached Kino and Hermes from behind them.

Kino turned around. There were two men standing there.

One was a tall, lean man about fifty years of age, wearing a brown suit. The other was a stocky man in his late twenties, wearing a black suit.

Both men took out shiny police badges from their jackets to show Kino, and introduced themselves as the detectives in charge of this case.

"I'm glad to see that you aren't hurt." The tall middle-aged man said first. "I've

been told that you saw the man who most likely did this. Although we are fully aware that you are not a resident of this country and that you have no obligation to do so, we would like to ask for your cooperation."

"If it's in my power to help you." Kino nodded.

"How many victims has it been now?" Hermes asked without a moment's hesitation. The detectives looked at one another.

"Well, I suppose one look at that wall will explain everything." The detective looked quite bitter. "This woman here is the twenty-fourth victim."

"That's a lot!"

"Yes. You're right." The detective nodded.

Kino recounted everything she remembered about the suspect. However, as she had only seen him in the light for a moment, there was not much she could tell the officers.

"Eye colour?"

"I'm not sure."

"Light grey." Hermes answered.

He went on to describe to the detectives the man's height, his approximate weight judging from his build, the shape of his eyes, the width of his shoulders, and the size of his head, among other things, as though he had gone and measured the culprit personally.

The younger detective, who had been frantically taking down notes, found himself asking, "How do you know all this?"

"It's because I'm a motorrad." Hermes replied.

The younger man left to deliver Hermes' information to the others. The police would use this information to start a nationwide search and check the statuses of ex-convicts.

"Thank you for this valuable information. You have our gratitude."

As thanks for this game-changing information, the detective told Kino and Hermes the story of this vicious serial killer.

As far as they could tell, the first incident occurred three years ago. However, there may have been some unsolved cases from even earlier that had been committed by the same perpetrator.

One night three years ago, a prostitute standing in the alleyway had been brutally stabbed to death.

Because she had not been stabbed many times, it was not deemed a premeditated murder. The police assumed that the woman had been killed by another prostitute in an argument over territory.

However, similar incidents continued to occur in the following half year. By the time they discovered the fourth victim, the police determined that they had a serial killer running loose in the city.

Since then, people like prostitutes, their bodyguards, drug dealers, restaurant employees, and drunk men stumbling in the streets were murdered one by one, for no reason other than the fact that they were in the alleys. Most of the corpses were discovered viciously mutilated.

Some of the victims were strong, healthy men armed with weapons, but the culprit had struck without warning, not even giving them time to fight back.

The police desperately searched for the criminal. Many names were placed, then removed from, the list of suspects. The culprit remained at large to this day.

Although they had arrested a potential suspect before, the serial killings began anew almost as soon as word of the arrest made it on the news--almost as though in order to prove the suspect innocent.

Another man who had been arrested for a separate crime had confessed to being the murder, but further questioning revealed that he was not the culprit.

And now, the serial killer had earned the nickname "The Nocturnal Killer", a hot topic of discussion for the people of the country.

Emerging in recent days were hardcore fans of the killer, mostly young people, and people who wandered the alleyways at night in the hopes of being murdered. The police were being driven to insanity.

Perhaps the only debatably good thing to come out of these incidents was that people had begun to understand that it was dangerous at night, and began to carry around concealed weapons. However, there was no end to the crowds going in and out of the country's only red light district. The number of victims continued to grow.

"This is some extremely valuable information. thanks to you, we might be able to arrest this criminal as early as tomorrow." The detective said.

"I hope you will."

"Collect your pay, Kino!"

"Of course, we will compensate you for everything. We may even call you to the station if we need your cooperation. Which hotel are you staying at?"

<=>

Although the hotel was only a short distance away, Kino and Hermes were escorted there by a police officer.

By the time Kino went to bed, the night had grown deep.

"I'm so sleepy."

"Good night, Kino. But what if the criminal comes in and tries to silence you?"

Kino reached down and made sure that [Cannon] was still hidden under her pillow.

"I'll be counting on your left hook, Hermes. Good night."

<=>

The next morning, Kino woke up with the sunrise.

And--

"I'm so sleepy."

Even still, she began practice as usual.

"Ever the diligent one, huh?" Hermes said suddenly.

"Oh!" Kino was surprised.

"What's wrong, Kino?" Hermes asked.

"Why are you awake so early, Hermes?"

"All the better to prepare for that left hook, Kino." He declared.

After practice, Kino took down the clothes she had hung to dry, took her time in the bath, and filled her stomach with a hearty breakfast.

It was a clear day.

As Kino and Hermes discussed where they would go today, someone suddenly knocked on the door.

"Excuse me, Miss Kino. There's an officer here to speak to you."

"Looks like we'll be heading to the police station." Kino said.

"Okay."

The two detectives from the night before were waiting for Kino and Hermes at the front desk.

"I didn't hear anything about you guys arresting the criminal yet." Hermes joked.

"Could you come with us for a while? We've located a man who is a perfect match with your accounts from last night. We'd... like you to identify him." The tall detective said hesitantly.

Kino agreed easily.

"Where are we going? The police station?" Hermes asked.

"No, we're going to his residence." The detective replied sullenly.

<=>

"And on such a beautiful day, too. You know, every motorrad just wants to run on his own two wheels." Hermes complained from the back of the truck.

Hermes was currently tightly secured to the back of a pickup truck. There was a canvas spread over him so that he could see almost nothing around him.

Kino, wearing her jacket, was sitting in one of the seats that lined either side of the bed of the truck. Across from her sat the detectives and two uniformed officers.

In all appearances, this was a perfectly normal pickup truck. Nothing identified it as a police vehicle.

Sitting in the front were two men dressed in common work clothes. However, they were concealing small .38 caliber five-round revolvers in their clothing. They were also police officers.

"Let's go over this again." The detective said to Kino and Hermes.

"We are now going to visit the suspect's residence. The suspect is male, twenty-eight years old, and single. He was originally from a farming family in the countryside, but he hit it big in business in the city. Now he's practically rolling in cash, and has been living in a luxury mansion in the suburbs for the past ten years. We have no idea who his father is, and his mother passed away four years ago. He's been living alone ever since." He continued, "We're going to pretend to deliver a package to him, and lure him to the front door. We'll open the canvas very slightly, and that's when the two of you will make sure that this is the same man you witnessed yesterday."

"I understand."

"Okay!"

Kino and Hermes answered.

"And if this guy's the same one we saw yesterday, what are you going to do?" Hermes asked the officer, "Are you going to arrest him on the spot and beat him until you get a confession out of him?"

"Of course not. We'll have to go to court to get a warrant issued and return for him then." The detective answered.

"What a hassle. In one of the countries we visited, a tiny bit of paperwork was all they had to do. Can't you make up a charge and arrest him now?"

The detective responded to Hermes' question as though scolding a child.

"In our country, anyone who is arrested without a valid warrant and is not given an official trial cannot be legally considered a criminal."

"So we have an anarchist versus a bunch of law-abiders, huh. You guys must have it rough." Hermes said. The officers and the detective laughed bitterly.

"Thanks for your concern."

The truck came to a stop at the front doors of a detached house.

The luxury mansion, situated in the suburbs a good distance from the city, was surrounded by a beautifully groomed forest.

Around this property were similar manors, alerting Kino that they were currently in a high-class neighbourhood. The officers had explained earlier that this was where the rich lived, driving to and from the city in their expensive automobiles.

The white mansion was a simple, one-storey building. Beside the main building was a large garage that could probably fit about five cars, although the doors were currently shut.

On the flower bed were autumn flowers in full bloom, a beautiful match for the blue sky.

The truck stopped at the intersection in front of the house. One of the officers stepped out. He reached into the back of the truck and took out a wooden box.

Inside was a canned pasta sauce gift set.

The plan was to call the package a free gift for VIP regulars at the downtown department store. They had already delivered the same package to several other houses in the neighbourhood in order to avoid rousing any unnecessary suspicion.

The officer approached the front door. The detective and the officers opened the canvas a sliver and swallowed dry gulps. The officer outside rang the fancy doorbell.

Several very long seconds passed. The officer pressed the doorbell again.

"Yes, who is it?"

It wasn't the door, but the window to its left, that opened. Kino could hear a gentle male voice from the vicinity of the window.

The man leaned his upper body out the window.

The detective opened the canvas slightly to give Hermes a view of the man. At

the same time, Kino did the same for herself.

And so, Kino and Hermes saw him.

"Delivery, sir."

"Oh, thank you."

"We'll need you to sign for it."

"Of course."

"Thank you. Have a wonderful day."

"You too."

After a short conversation, the officer handed the package to the man through the window and returned to the truck.

The truck drove off.

"So?" The detective asked.

"It's him!" Hermes answered triumphantly.

"I didn't get a very good look at him last night, but he looks very much like the culprit. Almost identical." Kino agreed calmly.

"I see..."

Surprisingly enough, the detective responded with a tinge of disappointment in his tone.

"What's wrong?" Hermes asked.

"That man cannot be arrested for yesterday's crime." The detective answered.

"Why not? Oh, I get it. He must be the son of some powerful politician, right?"

The detective shook his head.

"If only that were the case. I would have had him thrown in prison even if it meant losing my job."

"Then why not?"

"You see, that man has a perfect alibi. Last night he was attending a party

hosted by a local politician."

<=>

The truck made its way back to the police station with all the gravity of a hearse on a funeral day. The detectives clutched their heads in frustration as the officers sat there, lost for words of encouragement.

"So you were hoping we'd say that he *wasn't* the one?" Hermes asked rather insensitively.

"..."

The officer silently acknowledged the fact.

"What do you mean, Hermes?" Kino asked.

"I bet that man was a suspect a few times over now. But the police never managed to arrest him because he had a perfect alibi every time."

"Oh."

"That's why everyone was thinking, 'Please don't let it be him!'. They had the chance to take this man off the list of suspects once and for all." Hermes explained.

The back of the truck was once again enveloped in misery. The sound of the truck shaking down the road felt louder than usual.

The detective finally spoke.

"You're absolutely right. That man was one of our most likely suspects, but for each case we found that he had a perfectly airtight alibi. Having dinner at a restaurant in his neighbourhood, or attending a party, he was always visible to a large number of people at the time of the murders."

With the rhythmic rattling of the truck and the dull sound of the engine as a backdrop, the detective continued.

"There was just no way for him to have come all the way downtown and committed those crimes. We thought it was strange that he had such perfect alibis for each case, and considered that he had planted witnesses who could claim to have seen him elsewhere. But there were too many people who had

seen him elsewhere during the crime, including some of our own officers."

"I see." Kino mumbled quietly.

"Did you put him under surveillance?" Hermes asked.

"Naturally. We had officers watching him from morning to night. On weekdays he drives downtown early in the morning and works at his office until late at night, when he drives back home. We kept this up for days. But the murders didn't stop. In the end all we ended up doing was prove his alibi to be solid."

"Huh."

"By then we had no choice but to take him off our list of suspects, but hearing your accounts last night reminded me of him again. So let me ask you one more time. Is that man really the one you saw at the scene of the crime last night?"

"There's no mistaking it." Hermes answered immediately.

"No..." The detective sighed, shaking his head.

Freed from their duty of cooperation, Kino and Hermes returned to the hotel past noon.

"What now, Kino?"

"I'm not sure. I think I'll get something to eat and go shopping for supplies. We'll leave early tomorrow morning. I don't think we'll be able to provide any more help."

"Yeah. Even though I'm sure that man was the one."

"I think so too."

Kino had dinner at the hotel restaurant and headed for the downtown area on Hermes.

It was surprisingly quiet during the day, a stark contrast to the city's nightlife. Most stores were closed for the holiday, leaving the streets largely empty of cars and pedestrians.

Kino managed to find an open shop near the edge of the city. As usual, she sold what she could sell and bought what she had to buy. She also bought fuel

for Hermes.

It began to get warmer outside. Kino took off her coat, put it on the luggage seat, and fastened it with cords.

She was not wearing the holsters she usually wore at her right thigh and her back.

"My body feels so light it's almost awkward." Kino commented.

"Then how about putting on some more weight?"

"No, that's not what I'm talking about."

Kino and Hermes slowly rode along the deserted roads. They were moving slowly, so Kino had taken off her goggles and put them over her hat.

A car came up from behind and overtook them.

"Should I have dinner at the hotel, or the restaurant from yesterday?"

"I bet you'll run into another corpse if we go all the way to the restaurant."

"Then the hotel it is." Kino replied.

At that very moment, a car popped out from an alleyway on their left at full force, blocking Kino's way. It was the very same car that had overtaken them a little earlier.

"Whoa!"

Kino leaned left and hit the brakes, stopping Hermes' wheels from spinning. Hermes glided sideways, forcibly being driven into an alleyway.

"Not good!"

They narrowly managed to avoid the car.

When they drove into the alleyway, the box on the right side of Hermes' back wheel hit a metal trash can. The box bounced upwards, and the latch opened. The box rolled to the ground and towards the alleyway entrance.

"Argh."

After skidding against the trash can, Hermes began to slowly tilt to the left.

"There."

Deciding that it would do her little good to continue holding on, Kino took her hands off the handle and jumped, trying to avoid being crushed.

The heavy metallic thunk of Hermes falling on his side and the light clanging on trash cans being displaced sounded out simultaneously.

"That was terrible!" Hermes complained, before the trash can had even been silenced. The car door immediately opened, and a man leapt out.

The man ran towards Kino, whose back was turned against him. He drew out a large meat cleaver from his back coat.

"You've got a guest, Kino. Your left."

Guided by Hermes, Kino looked to her left.

The man who was charging towards her, cleaver in hand, was the very same man she had seen the night before. The man they had seen this morning.

This handsome features were set in an overjoyed grin as he rushed in Kino's direction, knife pointed at her.

Kino first reached for her right thigh.

"..."

She stopped midway. She then quickly put her hand into her left sleeve.

"Hello there! You're gonna have to die for me!"

The man smiled without a care as he closed in on Kino.

"..."

Kino looked back at him in silence.

Kino crouched to her right and avoided the man's attack, simultaneously swinging her right arm in a wide arc.

The man who had run towards her leapt over Hermes, took several steps into the alley, and stopped. He then turned around.

Kino also turned around, her eyes fixed on the man standing behind Hermes. She then glanced at the thin black knife she held in her right hand.

There was a dab of sticky red fluid clinging to its tip.

"Hey now, that hurt." The man said, rubbing his left thigh. The black pant leg was slit ever so slightly, exposing skin underneath along with a thin cut. The blood from the wound oozed onto the man's pant leg.

"What are you doing? Don't you know it hurts when you cut someone?" The man asked with a smile, swinging around his cleaver.

"That's what he says, Kino." Hermes said, "Now ignore him and get me back up." He requested.

"..."

Kino quietly glared at the man, knife steady in her right hand.

"Oh? Are you planning to fight me?"

"..."

"I'm strong, you know?"

"..."

"Are you listening to me?"

"..."

Kino did not respond; she merely looked into the man's eyes in utter silence.

About ten seconds passed.

"Tch! You're a total bore! And looks like you're not planning to die quietly, either! How insolent!" The man spat suddenly.

He then glanced at the box that lay near his feet. It was the black box that had fallen from Hermes.

The man crouched down and reached into the box, quickly drawing out [Woodsman], wrapped in cloth.

"Oh? What's this? Whatever it is, it's mine now. Bye."

The man turned and fled, running through the alleyway at full speed, holding his cleaver in his right hand and [Woodsman] in his left.

"..."

Kino soon tossed the knife in her hand towards the man.

The knife spun along the way, narrowly missing its target.

"Whoa!"

It grazed the man's left ear, slicing his earlobe vertically.

"You're a really terrible person, you know that? Are you trying to kill me?" The man asked, looking back mid-sprint with a look of ferocity.

"..."

That was when he spotted Kino taking out [Cannon] from the box on the left side of Hermes' rear tire.

Still crouching, Kino cast aside the cloth covering, drew [Cannon] from its holster, quickly raised the hammer, and aimed at the man.

"Murderer!" The man yelled, twisting to the side.

"..."

Kino did not pull the trigger. The moment she took aim, the man had leapt into a narrow alleyway and disappeared.

As the sound of the man's footsteps grew distant, Kino got to her feet with [Cannon] in hand.

"Looks like you've been robbed, Kino. What do we do? Go after him?" Hermes asked.

"No, I shouldn't." Kino replied coolly. "He probably knows the area better than we do. I'd rather not get in too deep in the alleys and get stabbed in the side. What I should actually be doing is-"

"Yes? You know what it is, right?" Hermes asked expectantly.

"I should be calling the police." Kino replied.

"Set me upright first!"

<=>

"Strange. It doesn't make sense, no matter how much I think it over." Hermes said back in the hotel room.

There was a dent on the tip of the left side of Hermes' handlebar and the

step. The box that had fallen was now back in its rightful place on the right side of his back wheel.

The sun had already set, and outside it was pitch black. Kino was lying on her bed in the dim room, wearing her button-up shirt.

Her blanket only covered her feet.

"..."

Her eyes were open.

<=>

Daytime. The immediate aftermath of the murderer's attack.

With the help of local residents, Kino contacted the police immediately. The tall detective and his young partner hurried to the scene.

Kino and Hermes explained the situation in full detail. They submitted the car blocking the alley and Kino's slightly bloodied knife as evidence.

The car turned out to have been stolen. The culprit had left behind nothing--not even fingerprints.

"Don't worry! I'm sure a DNA test can make everything clear once and for all!" Hermes said.

"A 'dee-and-eh' test? What might that be?" The detective asked, confused.

"Uh... Maybe you'll come up with something like that in the future." Hermes mumbled.

Kino explained that her hand persuader had been stolen, and warned the police that the culprit might make use of it in his crimes.

The detectives immediately ordered for officers to track down the man and search him in the city, and sent men to investigate his home.

The injuries to his leg and ear would be irrefutable proof of his guilt. If the man was home, the police would arrest him on charges of attempting to murder a traveler, and they would take custody of [Woodsman] as evidence.

Kino followed the detectives to the police station and waited for news.

The sun had begun to set when the men sent to the suspect's house contacted them via wireless.

The man was home.

The man was not in the least bit injured. They had looked carefully, but they did not find any wound on his leg or a cut on his ear.

They also reported that there had been a party taking place since midday at the man's house, and that many of his friends and neighbours had been present.

As the party guests attacked the officers with questions, the men reluctantly revealed that they had been sent there for an investigation into the attempted murder of a traveler that took place downtown that day.

"Are you cops stupid or something? How could someone who's been here all day have been downtown trying to kill a traveler?!"

The party guests berated them harshly.

As the officers asked for further instructions, the detective told them to wait a moment and confirmed the story with Kino and Hermes once more.

"I'm absolutely sure that I injured the man."

"I know I saw what I saw. There's the blood on the knife, too. Not even Kino goes around at random with a bloodied knife, you know."

The detective had no choice but to call back the officers.

It grew dark, but the man was nowhere to be found downtown. Kino and Hermes were escorted back to the hotel by an officer.

"Aren't you guys going to protect us at the station?" Hermes asked the officer on their way back.

"I don't think the perp's gonna be too keen on attacking you anytime soon, seeing as he got a taste of his own medicine today." The officer replied.

"You sure? Then what if he really does attack Kino?" Hermes asked, amused.

"If that happens, you'd better show him hell for us." The officer said, not even bothering to hide his contempt.

<=>

Hermes spoke up as Kino lay in bed.

"I don't really care who that culprit is or if you kill him or not, but what're you going to do about [Woodsman]?" He asked, his tone no different than usual despite the rather unsavoury topic of conversation.

"I wonder..." Kino mused, looking up at the ceiling. "I do have a few ideas."

"Tell me."

"First option: Since I don't have anything to gain from getting involved any further with this crazy killer, I could give up on getting [Woodsman] back and leave the country tomorrow on schedule."

"Huh. So you'd buy a new persuader here before we leave?"

"I don't know. I guess that's another thing to consider. Maybe if I spot a good .22 caliber automatic."

"What about your second option?"

"I could ignore the culprit and try to look for [Woodsman], and stay in this country as long as it takes me to find it. If he threw it away or sold it, then we leave as soon as I get it back."

"That doesn't sound too likely, though. What's choice #3?" Hermes asked, as though he already knew the answer.

Kino pressed a switch next to her bed.

With a simple *click*, the dim light disappeared, engulfing the room in total darkness.

"I get [Woodsman] back even if it means beating the culprit half to death."

"Hmm."

"I don't really know if it's worth half-killing someone for a single persuader, but..."

"But?"

"I have a lot of memories with [Woodsman]. I'd like to hold on to it until the

end."

"I knew it."

"That's why..."

"Hm?"

"I'll decide tomorrow."

"Good night, Kino."

"Good night, Hermes."

There was a rustle of bedsheets in the darkness. It then stopped as suddenly as it started.

<=>

The next day.

It was the morning of the third day since Kino had entered the country.

"So he didn't try to attack us last night after all. And I was so ready to give him a nice beating if he arrived, too." Hermes said as soon as Kino woke up, in sync with the rising sun.

"Good morning, Hermes."

"Good morning, Kino."

"My life would be so much easier if every morning could be like this."

"Life isn't supposed to be that easy, Kino."

Kino opened the curtains slightly. It was snowing outside.

"Huh? Isn't it a bit early for snow? Though, I guess it could turn to rain soon." Hermes guessed.

"We'd better set off before the snow starts piling up..." Kino said.

Though [Woodsman] was absent, Kino resumed her morning practice. Afterwards, she took a shower, ate breakfast, and prepared to depart.

"Any time now." Kino said.

"What do you mean?" Hermes asked.

At that very moment, someone knocked on their door.

"Miss Kino, the police are calling for you." The bellboy said.

Kino and Hermes checked out of the hotel and headed for the police station again, where they were shown a large number of photographs.

The black-and-white pictures spread across the table showed the body of a man who had been torn to shreds, his organs jutting out of his torso. On his face were three neatly arranged holes in a triangle formation. The holes had likely been made by bullets.

Kino was shown three shell casings that were found on the scene.

"They're definitely from my persuader." Kino nodded.

"He struck again last night. This is the twenty-fifth victim. And most likely it's a message directed towards you." The tall detective said, showing Kino one last picture of a wall at the scene of the crime.

Written on the wall, not with paint, but with the victim's innards acting as a pen, were the words: [Thank you very much for the weapon. You've no idea how much easier things will be for me from this point on. I will use it well. It's rather unfortunate that our paths will not cross again, but please don't forget about me on your travels.]

"..."

Kino sat down and showed all the photographs to Hermes, one at a time.

"Don't let him provoke you. He probably only shot the man after he killed him with the knife. You can tell from the way he was bleeding. Looks like our culprit's not much of a firearms person." Hermes said immediately.

"Our investigators reached the same conclusion. The culprit is enjoying himself by murdering his victims with a knife. He's never used a persuader, and the suspect doesn't have a license to own one." The detective said, but Kino did not look any more relieved.

"But I'm afraid I still don't feel very good about this. My persuader was originally used for assassinations, and I have killed people with it in the past. But that does not mean I can leave it behind in your country."

"Oh, you're going to stay here longer, Kino?"

"If necessary."

"Well, nothing ventured, nothing maimed, right?"

"..."

"Uh. Right."

The detective continued calmly. "If you will cooperate with us because you feel responsible or you want to retrieve your persuader, I would be grateful for your support. But don't think it will be so easy to arrest the suspect."

"He's not a suspect, he's the culprit. We saw him in broad daylight."

"But we must remember that he was standing at a distance. That is an undeniable fact."

"Yeah, but-" Hermes stopped himself, then spoke up again. "Detective, this is such an obvious possibility that I didn't bother asking you from the beginning, but..."

"Yes?"

"Does that man, by any chance, have a twin brother? Maybe one of them, or maybe even both of them are taking turns committing crimes. Maybe he's always got an alibi because the other twin's always covering for him."

Kino was the first to respond.

"I thought about that, too, Hermes. But I'm sure the police have already considered it. Just a quick background check would be enough."

"But still..."

Hermes and Kino went silent.

"Kino, Hermes..." The detective said, completely lost, "what is this 'twin' you speak of? Some sort of... person who is capable of magic?"

"Pardon?" "Huh?" Kino and Hermes asked in unison.

Hermes gave the detective and the officers a kind and detailed explanation about the concept of twins.

"Th, that's outrageous! How could two people with the same face be born at once?!"

The detective stood from his chair, his face almost comically pale. The same went for the large, young detective at his side, and the many officers standing around them.

"So they really had no idea..." Kino breathed.

"Some bloodlines are more predisposed to multiple births, so it's no surprise the opposite exists, too. I guess there was no recorded instance of them in this country." Hermes whispered."

"I have no idea if I should be happy or ashamed that we've never had twin travelers or merchants visiting our country. I'm sure we would have hurt them with terrible insults had they visited us. I will apologize on everyone's behalf. Hm. To all you twins out there, we are truly sorry. Our nation must be an anomaly."

The detective, shaking his head in disbelief, plunked down onto his chair.

"But, but... that explains everything. So all along, it was him! I mean, them!"

"The simplest tricks are usually the most effective." Hermes said. "What're you going to do? Can you get an arrest warrant immediately?"

The officer fell into thought for a moment.

"..."

He shook his head.

"Not surprising." Hermes said somewhat jokingly, ignoring the officers' despair.

"First, you'd have to prove that they're twins, and get arrest warrants for them both." Hermes said. "But his parents--"

"Probably didn't register them both." Kino finished the sentence. "They must have given birth to them in secret and hidden them away because they were scared the kids would be treated like exotic animals. They probably had them take turns going outside, protecting them."

"That must have been a lot of work. Mothers are amazing."

"But once they'd matured, they must have realized that they could use this to their advantage to create alibis for themselves. They could become criminals who would never be caught. This is just a guess, but they must have been at this for--"

The large detective gasped, coming to a realization.

"Then the other crimes, as well?"

"Probably. I'm willing to bet that a good number of unsolved cases you might have might have been committed by them."

"Of course! That's how he became so rich overnight and succeeded in his business, and he's now living in the lap of luxury... Damn those bastards!" The young detective slammed his fist into the palm of his hand.

"What are you going to do? Are you going to catch them in when they're in the same spot, register them both as citizens, and then get warrants for them both? That's going to take forever." Hermes said.

"We can't wait that long." Kino added, looking rather upset.

"Should we just leave the rest to the police and go? We could give up on [Woodsman]."

"Hm..."

As Hermes and Kino continued discussing the matter, the tall detective suddenly spoke up with startling resolution.

"Kino, Hermes. You remember the lecture you received on our laws when you entered our country, correct? There is actually a very good reason we gave you the lesson."

"Wait! Sir!" The younger detective and the other officers paled.

"All of you, be quiet! Let me explain." The tall detective stopped his subordinates.

"What is it, what is it?"

"Why was the lecture necessary?"

Hermes didn't seem the least bit serious, but Kino sounded determined. The detective finally answered them.

"It's because our laws don't apply to you."

<=>

It was halfway through the afternoon.

The snow from the morning had turned to rain.

Small, cold drops of water quietly fell down upon the beautiful white manor in the forest.

"We're here." Hermes said, loudly coming to a stop in front of the mansion.

On the luggage seat over his back wheel was not a bag, but a wooden box.

Of course, Kino was sitting in the rider's seat. Her hat and coat were soaked by the rain.

Kino shut off the engine and propped Hermes up on his centre stand. She took off her goggles and her coat, rolling it up and putting it on the ground.

Kino, wearing her black jacket, was wearing a holster on her right thigh--and clearly visible in the holster was [Cannon].

"I'll be back, Hermes."

"See you soon."

Kino headed for the front door in the rain. The sounds of her footsteps on the gravel joined the pattering of the rain.

Kino stood before the front door and reached for the doorbell. She pressed down on the button.

Dozens of seconds passed.

"Yes, who is it?"

Like before, it was the window to the left of the door that opened. The occupant of the house stuck his head out the window.

He looked identical to the culprit they had encountered downtown the previous day, but there was no injury on his left ear.

"..."

Kino said nothing, drawing [Cannon] and taking aim at the man. She pulled the trigger.

<=>

"It's because our laws don't apply to you."

"..."

Kino frowned.

"What do you mean?" Hermes asked.

The young detective and the other officers looked as though they might burst into tears at any moment.

"Our laws don't apply to outlanders like you. That's because of the clause 'These laws shall only apply to citizens of our country', which had been decided when our laws were first established in the distant past. Almost no one remembers this clause anymore, other than those who are particularly well-read on legal matters." The tall detective said, as though recounting a painful memory. "With all the travelers and merchants coming in and out of our country, we should be doing something about this clause, but the changes were never made. That is why the police pressure any visiting outlanders by giving them this lecture and warning them of our strict sentences. Thanks to this, we have never had a foreigner commit a crime in our borders in our entire history."

"..."

"Huh."

"So, to be honest... Even if a traveler kills someone, I have no legal right to arrest them. At best we could manage to exile the traveler."

"..."

"You know, you're free to just say Kino should-"

"That is all I will say. If anyone asks, just mention my name. I will take responsibility." The detective said gravely.

"I understand." Kino said, finally breaking her silence. "You're saying that I

have the ability to do something that you're not capable of."

"That is correct."

"Then let me be honest with you."

"..."

"I have no intention of killing them."

<=>

Shot in the head, the man fell limply and slid out the window. His body fell towards a flower bed.

"..."

As the man fell, Kino fired four more shots at him. The bullets made their mark, one at each of the man's elbows and knees.

The sound of gunfire dissipated into the rain, along with the white smoke rising from [Cannon].

The man lay on the damp soil outside the window.

"Urgh! Ahh! Guh! Argh!"

Every time a gunshot rang out, he screamed as though he was matching pace.

The bullets had bounced off the man, falling to the ground. They were made of hard rubber.

Having been shot at point-blank range, the man was immobile, his limbs unwilling to budge. Kino grabbed him by the ankles.

"Hah!"

With a short cry, she pulled him along.

"Argh..."

She dragged the man over the gravel path as though she were transporting a piece of luggage.

Kino stopped right beside Hermes, setting the man down and changing [Cannon]'s cylinder. Loaded in the new one were also non-lethal rubber bullets.

"Urgh... what the hell are you doing...? What'd I do to deserve this?"

The man struggled on the ground, his luxurious shirt and pants covered in mud, his handsome face streaked with tears.

"..."

Kino ignored him and quickly tied his ankles together with rope.

And then she spoke.

"I've been told that you drove all the way downtown and back this morning."

The man, the pain in his arms and legs finally dissipating, glared at Kino.

"What of it?! What gives you the right to do this to me, you bastard? Damn it, that hurts!"

"I'm sure it would be nothing difficult to hide someone in the trunk of a car. Isn't that the trick you used to travel between the downtown area and the suburbs?"

"What are you talking about? I never drove anyone around!"

"Then there's nobody in your house right now?" Hermes asked the man lying before him.

"No!"

"Really?"

"Yes!"

"That's good to hear."

As Hermes talked with the man, Kino opened the box on the luggage seat and took out the gas mask resting inside.

The gas mask covered her entire face. Two panes of glass were over the eyes, and a cylinder that purified the air was set over the mouth. This was actually police gear, but the mark identifying it as such had been erased.

Kino took off her hat and put on the gas mask.

"So in the end, I'm using one of Master's plans. Thank you for all your work, Master." She thanked someone who was not beside her.

Slightly pulling the gas mask from her face, Kino unsealed the cylinder, and breathed through it several times.

"Wh-what are you doing?" The man spat.

"Kino, that traveler, is going to burn down your house." Hermes answered.

Having finished putting on the mask, Kino took out a cloth bag from the wooden box and slung it diagonally over her right shoulder. The objects inside the bag clattered.

"Can you guess what's inside?" Hermes asked the rain-soaked man.

"How the hell am I supposed to know?!"

Kino, wearing the gas mask, made her way towards the house step by step. The objects in her bag clattered each time her foot hit the ground.

"Molotov Cocktails. Every last one of them. Attention, please. We will now be proceeding with the torching of this manor."

"Shit! Stop! That's my house, you bastard! My *home*!"

"We know."

Kino stopped before the window through which the man had been extracted and took a peek inside. She could see an elegantly furnished parlour.

"..."

Kino took out one bottle from her bag. It was painted an opaque black, but a short piece of string sticking out of the mouth was clearly visible.

With the fingers of the right hand in which she grasped [Cannon], Kino tugged on the string and tossed it into the house.

Clang. Something shattered and smoke came pouring out. Soon, the entire room was filled with white smoke that also spilled out the window.

"I guess that one didn't catch fire so well. Keep at it, Kino!" Hermes said, enjoying the situation.

"STOP THIS, YOU LUNATIC!" The man cried.

"..."

Kino silently climbed in through the open window and entered the house.

<=>

"This is the blueprint of his mansion. I obtained it from the engineering office that constructed his house ten years ago." The detective said.

"Legally?" Hermes asked jokingly.

"That doesn't matter. Thank you, detective. This will be extremely helpful."

Kino carefully studied the floor plans.

<=>

Kino steadily walked across the parlour filled with white smoke. She drew another bottle from her bag and pulled the string.

The bottle, however, was not a Molotov Cocktail. It was a smoke bomb that spewed out even more white smoke from its mouth.

Kino groped in the smoke for the door that led into the hallway. She gently opened it, at the same time charging into the hall.

The white smoke began to obscure the long hallway.

"..."

Keeping [Cannon] trained on the other end of the hall, Kino waited until visibility was completely zero before making her way through.

<=>

As Kino studied the floor plan, the detective spoke to Hermes.

"Does Kino mean to memorize all this and fight in zero-visibility conditions?"

"Yeah."

"I agree that smoking out the culprit will no doubt be an effective plan. But what about the possibility that your opponent endures it and counterattacks?"

"That's what Kino's expecting. After all, that smoke's not poisonous or anything."

"Isn't it dangerous to fight in such conditions? After all, the culprit must have a firm grasp of the layout of his own home."

"Zero visibility's no problem for Kino."

"Why is that?"

"Once the smoke covers everything, Kino's just going to shut her eyes."

"You don't mean-"

"Master trained her well. Kino can fight in dark rooms or pitch-black caves. All she has to do is stop trying to see things she can't see and close her eyes."

"But how...? What sense does she rely upon to fight?"

"Sound, first of all. And something that a motorrad like me doesn't have."

"What might that be?" The detective asked.

"Intuition." Hermes answered simply.

<=>

Slowly creeping down the pure white hallway, Kino kept her left hand on the wall along the way.

Soon, she touched the doorknob on the door leading to the master bedroom, as the floor plans had indicated.

Kino took out another smoke bomb and pulled the string. She quietly turned the doorknob and rolled the bottle through the opening.

She waited for several seconds, and confirmed that she could hear nothing from within.

"..."

Kino continued on her way, following the floor plan she memorized.

<=>

From the outside, no flames were visible. However, white smoke was pouring out from between the windows and doors.

"Oh no! That house is on fire!" A middle-aged man passing on a bike screamed, seeing the smoke.

"H, help..."

And as if he didn't notice Hermes and the bound man who was struggling on the ground, the middle-aged man rode his bike through the rain, and raced over to the smaller house next door, beyond the trees.

"Fire! The house next door's on fire! Call the cops and the fire department!" The man yelled at the house. He then sped off on his bike to inform the other neighbours. It was all going according to Kino's plan.

Hearing the commotion and seeing the smoke, the neighbours rushed over to the man's house.

About twenty or so residents gathered around.

"How did this happen?"

They were shocked by the smoke-filled house.

"Hey! Are you all right? Who did this to you?"

They were shocked by the man, squirming like a caterpillar on the ground in front of the house.

"..."

Hermes said nothing. The neighbours untied the man's ankles and wrists.

"I'm glad you're all right!"

The kind but ignorant neighbours were truly relieved to see that one of their members was safe.

That was when ten police vehicles of various sizes, two fire trucks, and an ambulance arrived with sirens blaring.

The neighbours were so relieved that they did not even pause to wonder how the police and the fire department could have responded so quickly.

"Thank goodness! Now we can put out the fire!"

"It's a good thing you weren't caught up in there!"

"That's right! You can always rebuild a house, after all! You're welcome to stay at my place until then!"

Everyone had nothing but kind words for the man.

"..."

The man said nothing. He merely sat before Hermes, face pale and his unbound arms and legs limp.

"There, there... You must have been terrified. don't worry. You're safe now."

A young single woman who lived nearby took the opportunity to gently embrace the man from behind.

<=>

"Strange..." Kino mumbled, having tossed about a dozen smoke bombs into the rooms.

She was out of smoke bombs. Kino had already tossed at least one into each room in the manor, and they still continued to spew out smoke.

There was no place in the manor that the smoke did not reach. Her surroundings were white, as though she were standing in mist.

Kino could not sense any human presence in the room, not even a cough.

"Strange..."

<=>

Meanwhile, in front of the house--

"Why aren't you going inside?" The local residents asked the firemen.

"That's because we cannot see any flames from here. We suspect that this might not be an ordinary fire, but may involve some dangerous chemicals. We're waiting for another team to arrive with oxygen tanks for us." The firemen said, bringing up a story they had fabricated ahead of time.

"..."

The man sat quietly, receiving treatment for his injuries.

"She's taking a while. Is she really all right?"

"Who knows?"

"I don't even hear any gunfire."

"I guess she hasn't found him yet."

Hermes and the detective were engaged in tense conversation.

"Hey, was that blueprint you got for us really accurate?" Hermes asked.

"Of course. After all, we got our hands on it when we had him under surveillance. In our country, you need to get a permit for all large-scale renovations."

"Then I'll ask you one more thing. Was there another house on that plot of land before this one?"

"I'm not sure. Why do you ask?"

"If there was another house there before, and they tore it down to build another one on top of it-"

Hermes didn't even get a chance to finish.

"Of course! A basement!"

<=>

"I guess there must be a basement here after all." Kino mumbled, still wandering the smoke-filled hallways.

She quickened her pace, the heavy heels of her boots stamping on the floor.

<=>

"That's right. If he's still in there, the basement's his only hiding place. And if it's ventilated, then he'll be able to wait out the smoke. And it must have worked wonders for him trying to hide every day, too."

"Damn it! Should we call Kino back, do you think?"

"It's too late now. You guys have to try and arrest Kino as soon as she steps out from that mess, right?"

"Well, yes."

"Then Kino has no other choice. She has to come out with the man. This is our first and only chance."

"But wouldn't it make things even more difficult for her to pursue him into the basement?"

"Kino probably already knows that."

"Should we send in some men to back her up?" The detective asked. Officers in gas masks were standing by inside the police truck.

"You'd better not. They'll just get in Kino's way."

"Then what do you think Kino will do? Will she fall back because of the disadvantage?"

"No. She knows all of that, but I bet she'll just charge in anyway because she doesn't have any other choice."

"..."

"That's all she can do."

"I don't believe she's doing this for the sake of our country. So is that persuader of her really that important to her...?"

"Maybe."

<=>

"..."

Kino had been stomping around the house with her boots, when she came to a place with flooring that sounded clearly different.

According to the floor plan, it was a room used as a storage space. It was also the only room in the house that was not used on an everyday basis.

Crouching down, Kino put her eye to the floor so that she could see despite the thick smoke. She noticed a small gap in the floorboards.

Jamming her fingers into the gap, Kino leaned over so that she could aim [Cannon] while preparing to evade any sudden shots or attacks.

"There."

She wrenched the floor open. Before her was a trapdoor, just large enough for a person to pass through. A breeze was blowing from the space underneath, clearing away a bit of the smoke around Kino.

"..."

Underneath was a wooden staircase leading down into darkness.

Kino aimed at the general vicinity of the darkness and pulled the trigger.

<=>

A faint echo of the gunshot reached the ears of the locals gathered outside the house, surprising everyone.

"S-something may have exploded inside! Please, everyone! Stand back!" An officer ordered, his own surprise half genuine.

"Did she get him?" The detective asked Hermes.

"I don't know. Maybe she just found the basement door? She might have just opened fire into the entryway."

"For what? Is it a warning shot, do you think?"

"No. She's going to estimate the size of the basement by the resonance of the gunshot."

<=>

Kino removed her gas mask, and unflinchingly stepped into the darkened stairway.

She entered the dank space and closed the hatch above her with her own two hands. In the blackness, she stepped down onto a brick floor.

She could hear absolutely nothing.

Kino started to take out a miniature flashlight from her pocket.

"..."

She stopped. Instead, she crouched on the ground and began groping along the wall with her left hand.

Extending her right leg, she felt another wall to her right. She could tell that this basement passage was long and narrow. With the grip of [Cannon], which she held in her right hand, she struck the floor.

A crisp impact rang out through the passage. The sound bounced off the walls and made its way to Kino's ears.

Kino silently took three steps forward and struck the ground once again.

She repeated her actions yet another time.

And immediately after her third repetition--

"..."

Kino kicked the wall on her left.

Several things made noise at once in the darkness.

The sound of the flimsy wooden door squeaking under the pressure of Kino's kick.

The sound of [Woodsman] being fired multiple times from behind the door.

The sound of the bullets piercing through the door.

And the sound of those bullets passing over Kino's head and smashing the bricks on the other side of the passage.

Kino, bent down as low as humanly possible, was counting.

"... Five. Six. Seven."

She had been numbering the gunshots. The moment they stopped, she put all her weight into her left leg and kicked the door with all her strength.

Again and again she kicked it, without a hint of hesitation. Her efforts were rewarded approximately five kicks later, when the door broke off its hinges and fell backwards.

Kino fired a single shot from [Cannon] into the darkness.

The gunshot roared into the cramped space.

"Whoa!"

As did a distinct, masculine scream.

There was a sound like someone was running. Kino did not make an effort to chase the escaper, and waited for his footsteps to stop.

The sound stopped. It was at that very moment a somewhat excited male voice began to speak from somewhere in the darkness.

"Hah! Real reckless of you, huh? You're not a cop, you're that traveler! Never expected you'd storm in all this way! But you know, I never sent you an invitation!"

The man's voice was coming from somewhere close by. But there was a slight echo to it, as though he was hiding behind a corner. Kino did not open fire, instead crouching down beside the fallen door.

She then replied to the darkness.

"That's right. Hello there. I'm afraid I had to exert a bit of force with the man upstairs to come all this way."

"Don't play dumb. You must've threatened him, right? You're a terrible human being!"

"I have to say, your older brother looks just like you. Or is he the younger one?"

"Haha! I'd have expected no less from a traveler! You're nothing like those idiots in this country!"

"I knew it. Would you return my persuader to me?"

"No. I'm gonna use it to kill more people."

"You don't have any more ammunition left."

"...How did you know?!"

"Because it's mine."

"..."

There was a metallic sound as something slid across the brick-laid floor. The sound passed by Kino, hit one of the passage walls, and stopped.

"There! You can take it back!"

"Thank you. But perhaps you could have treated it more gently."

"Shut up! It's just a weapon, anyway. Who cares, you murderer?"

"Should I be laughing right now? Or getting angry?"

"Whatever you want. 'Cause you're going to die soon anyway!"

Click. The man, having ended the conversation, must have pressed a switch somewhere.

Very small lights came on.

Miniature lightbulbs hanging at regular intervals along the passage came to life, glowing a faint orange. They were just strong enough that Kino could vaguely make out the patterns of the bricks on the ceiling.

"..."

Kino slowly looked around herself. Although her eyes were now used to the darkness, she could see nothing beyond the areas illuminated by the lights, not even her own hands.

She could hear the man's voice speaking to her.

"Ahahaha! Surprised? This much is enough for me to see everything. I can see well in the dark, just like a cat. Nighttime exists for me! That's how I could kill all those people downtown. After all, I can see them, but they can't see me!"

The confident voice began to move.

"..."

To Kino, it sounded either like the voice was growing more distant or it was coming closer, harshly reverberating against the walls.

"I'm special. I'm better than you and I'm above everyone else. I'm different from idiots like you people."

"..."

"You better be thankful that you get to be killed by the greatest man in the world. Why don't you scream, 'Thank you' when I kill you?"

The voice continued moving.

"..."

Kino, however, did not take a single step. She closed her eyes.

"Oh, so there you are, traveler. I'll be right over to kill you."

"..."

"Give up? You haven't budged an inch."

"..."

"Let me hear you scream. Show me your fear. I'll cut you up and stuff your guts into your mouth."

"..."

"I'll pluck your nails off one by one before I kill you and drive them into your eyes."

"..."

"I'll let you experience the joy of being killed by the greatest man in the world until you die."

"..."

"You have to tell me how it feels."

"..."

"Looks like you're travelling, but that's all over now!"

"..."

"This is the last chapter of your journey."

"..."

"Tell me. How does it feel to face death at the hands of the greatest man in the world?"

"..."

"To become part of the happiness of someone much better than yourself."

"..."

"Is it scary? Or exciting?"

"..."

"Hahaha! So now I'll kill you."

"..."

"Someone like me just *has* to shine even brighter!"

"..."

"And to do that, I need to break even more people."

"..."

"I'm better than you. I'm invincible. I'm absolute!"

The the man's trembling voice stopped.

Kino pulled the trigger.

She shot into the darkness with little effort, her eyes still shut.

The sound of the gunshot filled the basement, and only faded away after a very long series of echoes.

"Gah..."

She could hear something like the sound of a bird being strangled.

Kino took out her flashlight with her left hand and pointed it at the area ahead of her.

On the brick floor of the basement, about three metres in front of her, lay a man. He was entirely naked and barefoot, likely to prevent himself from making unnecessary noise. Clutched in either hand was a large knife.

And inside his mouth was the rubber bullet Kino had fired.

"Koff... Koff..."

Saliva dripping from his mouth, the man twitched and groaned.

Kino took several steps towards the naked man and stood at his feet. The man glared at Kino, eyes glinting, and silently tightened his grip on his knives.

"'Invincible'? 'Superior'? 'Absolute'?" Kino repeated his claims, "so what?"

And as the man began to sit up, she pulled the trigger, aim fixed on his crotch.

<=>

The rain had stopped.

About thirty people were gathered outside the manor, standing under the cloudy skies. And as Hermes watched, the manor doors opened.

Kino emerged from the door in a cloud of white smoke, wearing her gas mask.

"Who is that?"

"He must be behind all this!"

"Hey, police! Catch him before he gets away!"

The residents cried out in outrage.

"Suspect sighted! Arrest him!"

"Don't let him get away!"

The police said, running towards Kino.

"Did she get him?" The detective asked.

"I don't know. Take care of the rest, okay?" Hermes replied.

The detective ran over to Kino, whose arms were held behind her back by the officers. He then had her loaded onto a police cruiser.

Seconds later, the detective got off the car and ordered the firemen to enter the manor.

The firemen, carrying on their backs oxygen tanks they had brought from the very beginning, entered the manor. They opened all the windows from the inside, expelling the white smoke from the interior.

An amusingly large amount of smoke escaped through the wide-open windows. The local residents watched in joy.

"What a relief! They even caught the bastard responsible!"

"And your house is going to be just fine!"

They gave their congratulations to the owner of the house, who still remained seated on the ground.

"..."

He said absolutely nothing, face still pale as death.

Once the smoke had been entirely cleared out, the detective spoke to the owner of the house.

"We will be entering your house in order to investigate the scene of the crime for evidence."

With a legitimate excuse, the detective and several officers entered the manor.

Soon, they came outside with an unconscious man on a stretcher.

"We found this man inside."

They placed the stretcher on the ground before the man and his neighbours.

The man on the stretcher, who was wrapped in a blanket, looked identical to the man sitting on the ground.

Several locals looked at both men at the same time and fainted on the spot.

The young woman who had been consoling the man fled with a shriek.

Hermes looked at the man on the stretcher, who had a scar on his ear, and the man silently sitting on the ground with his head bowed, said to himself,

"So is this going to solve everything? Or not?"

But no one had heard him speak.

<=>

The beautiful evening sun began to emerge from behind the scattering clouds. Kino and Hermes stood at the western gate of the country, illuminated by its light.

Hermes was fully loaded with Kino's belongings. Holstered on Kino's waist was [Woodsman].

"Why not rest a while? You should stay another night." The tall detective offered.

"My work here is done." Kino declined politely.

"Anyway, Kino's guilty of trespassing and assault here now. We have to make our getaway." Hermes said cheerily.

"I suppose you're right. Both of you are truly amazing. Thank you so much for coming to our country." The detective said, and offered Kino a handshake. Kino

took it.

"Goodbye then."

"Bye now!"

Kino rode Hermes out of the country.

The detective quietly watched them leave, until they disappeared beyond the closing gates.

<=>

"We better hurry and find a place to camp for the night." Kino said to Hermes, riding under the setting sun.

"Why didn't you stay another night? You could have spent a cushy night at the hotel. They might have treated you to lots of great food." Hermes said. Mud splashed up from the wet road and hit his chassis.

"I just wanted to get [Woodsman] back. They already gave me my compensation, too. And to be honest, I don't feel like getting any more involved with those crazy brothers." Kino spat, annoyed.

"Oh! So looks like we were on the same page after all, Kino!" Hermes cried in triumph.

"Hermes... you mean, you too?"

"That's what anyone would normally think. It's easier that way, after all!"

"I don't have any proof, though. It's just a matter of probability." Kino said, speeding up.

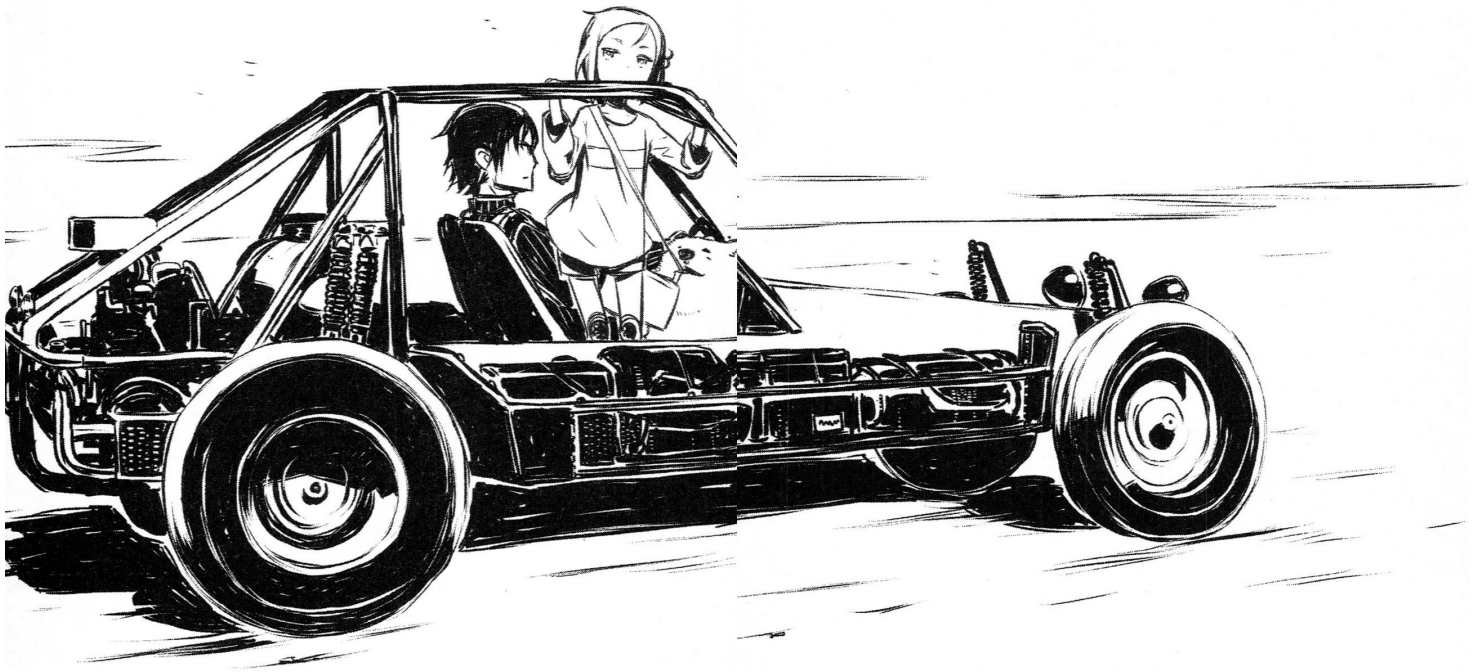
On the night the traveler left the country, the corpse of a murder victim was discovered in an alleyway.

Written in blood beside the corpse were the words:

"That's for my brothers, you bastards"



プロローグ
「戦って死ぬということ・a」
— Order!・a —



Epilogue: "What it Means to Fight and Die・a" — Order!・a —

My name is Riku. I'm a dog.

I have long, white, fluffy fur. My face makes me look as if I'm always happy and smiling, but it doesn't mean that I am. I was just born this way.

My master is Shizu. He is a young man who always wears a green sweater, and who has been traveling by buggy ever since he lost his homeland due to complex circumstances.

Traveling with us is Ti. She's a quiet girl with a fondness for grenades, who has become part of our team ever since she lost her homeland due to complex circumstances.

—

This is a story from when we visited a certain country.

The country sat in the middle of an expansive plain, surrounded by several other small countries that seemed more-or-less the same. They were always at war.

The reason being that they were in a constant struggle for resources.

None of the countries were powerful enough to expand their border walls, so they sent people outside to gather resources. They settled once they found cultivable land and sent the resources back to their home country.

In this swampy region, the war over those precious patches of land raged on without end.

For whatever reason, the rational conclusion, "If we could talk this out, we could reduce our losses," never occurred to the people living here.

Or maybe they just couldn't bring themselves to trust their enemies.

The country we were visiting was one of those, warring for close to 100 years. It was abundantly clear that it wasn't a suitable country to stay in, so Master Shizu decided to leave immediately.

The country we visited before this one was also caught up in a war.

Master Shizu had hoped that this country might be different, that it might be making an effort to stop the war, but unfortunately, that's not at all how it was.

He stocked up on more food and fuel than usual, and took the buggy through the country gates.

—

A short distance beyond the walls, the country's troops were stationed out on the dry, sunny plain.

We had heard about them as we were leaving the country; apparently they had built an encampment outside the country, where they lived and conducted operations.

Both sides of the road were lined with basic tents.

The soldiers were relaxing outside their tents.

I guess they were technically soldiers, but almost all of them were kids. They were boys ranging from 10 to 15 years old.

"Child soldiers, huh," Master Shizu grumbled.

No matter where you go, warfare is almost always a job for young men, but when they're extremely lacking, some countries will take little boys and girls into the service too.

Even then, with volunteers that are passionate about defending their country, it's not easy to send them through military training, teach them to look sharp in their uniforms, provide them with decent equipment and a salary — and actually get them ready to operate as part of a real military force.

Sometimes an army will forcibly conscript kids or even kidnap them, and then brainwash them or get them addicted to drugs in order to make them obey. They can't actually fight without proper training or equipment, so they end up as meat shields for the real soldiers or get used in what are basically just suicide missions. For the army, they're nothing more than simple disposables.

The kids that were staring curiously at the buggy were the latter type.

They wore ragged, dirty clothes that weren't worth calling "uniforms", and they only had sandals for shoes. A lot of them didn't even have sandals. Their weapons were bolt-action persuaders, but again, some of them didn't have those either.

"..." Ti stared at the boys, who were about the same age as her.

The boys stared back at her with empty, ghost-like eyes, and I can't imagine what Ti was thinking at that moment. Master Shizu couldn't know either. Probably no one in the world knows what goes on in Ti's head.

Then, bursting through the tents, "xxxxx! xxxxx!"

One of the boys shouted something as he ran out into the road, towards the buggy.

It was impossible to tell what his intentions were, but luckily, he wasn't carrying anything in his hands.

Master Shizu slammed on the brakes to avoid running the kid over, and at the same time, the sharp sound of gunfire echoed into the air.

The boy trembled for a second, and stopped running. A fountain of blood sprayed out of his head, and he collapsed flat onto the ground. He didn't move again.

The boy's blood seeped across the ground, ending his 10-year lifespan.

"All of you, at attention! Those closest, dispose of that body!"

The orders were delivered in an icy voice by a man holding a hand persuader.

He looked to be about 30 years old. His body was chiseled, and he wore a uniform that was decorated with his officer insignia and medals, without a speck of dirt. The boots on his feet were polished to shine.

At the officer's orders, all of the boys within hearing distance jumped as if they'd been whipped, and lined up into formation, standing stiffly upright. A handful of them ran over to the dead body, to clean up the remains of their comrade.

The officer holstered his automatic hand persuader and strode over to the buggy.

"Hello there, travelers. Please forgive that soldier just now." He spoke to Master Shizu with a pleasant smile.

Then he looked over to Ti, "You too, miss. Sorry for scaring you."

"Don't worry about it." Ti looked back into his brown eyes and responded, which was rare for her.

The officer looked at her blankly for a second, and then burst out laughing, "Wahahahaha! Thanks."

The mood around the buggy was lighthearted, while the dead boy's body was carried away, still bleeding from the head.

Master Shizu asked the officer from the driver's seat, "It doesn't really bother me, but did you really need to kill that boy?"

"Of course," the officer replied without hesitation.

"If I had shot him in the leg, he'd need medical treatment. We don't have that kind of medicine or time to waste. Besides, he was being rude to you travelers. The best way to maintain order was to kill him. Furthermore, if I didn't shoot him in the head, the bullet could have gone through and hit one of the soldiers standing behind him."

"...I see."

"He was a bomber, you see. His job would have been to sneak into a bush with a bomb, and then jump out once he sees an enemy vehicle. Not too different from the buggy you all are traveling in. But I hope it doesn't bother you too much. There's a big difference in the weight of their lives and someone like us. I mean, traveler, even you would be willing to kill someone to protect yourself, or your cute kid and doggy, right?"

"..." Master Shizu was silent, offering no rebuttal.

The officer said, "What are we talking out here for? Won't you come to my tent for some tea?"

—

And so, we were led into a large tent.

It was set up quite carefully, at a bit of a distance from the boys' tents. Naturally, none of the filthy boys were anywhere nearby.

The tent was propped up by poles at each of the four corners, providing shade. In the center was a desk, with a chair on one side and two on the other, which were set up just now.

Master Shizu and Ti sat on the side with two chairs, and the officer sat across from them, on the one chair.

There were three boys with clean uniforms in the tent, working as the officer's attendants.

They were superb workers, bringing out tea immediately. They even brought some out for me in a shallow dish. It was quite cold too, how thoughtful.

I sniffed it and sipped a little — it didn't seem to be poisoned. Just delicious tea.

"Aren't they excellent? It's so hard to believe that they used to be the same as that lot from before," the officer laughed.

His words were the only thing that was poisonous.

Looking around, there were only a few people, or rather, adults, wearing the same uniform as him.

"As you can see, this is a child army, under the direction of the handful of us regular army officers," the officer spoke, as if reading my mind. "When a battle breaks out, they'll fight without concern for their own lives. They're the perfect soldiers."

Master Shizu slowly sipped his tea, responding only with, "I see."

"They always follow orders. Well, except for a few defective ones, like that one you ran into earlier," the officer laughed. "Maybe I should give you a demonstration."

He stood up from his chair and passed his hand persuader to one of the child soldiers standing at his side, ready to refill his tea at any time.

The boy took the persuader without flinching, and the man said, "Put it in your mouth and release the safety."

"Yes sir."

Just as instructed, the boy shoved the point of the gun into his mouth.

"Pull the trigger when I say, 'Now!'" the officer instructed.

The boy couldn't speak, so he nodded calmly instead. His eyes were dull, not showing any change in emotion.

The officer grinned and pointed a question at us, "What should I do? It's exactly as you see. Would you like to watch what happens when I give the order?"

"No," Master Shizu said.

The officer turned to the boy and gave his next order, "That's enough. Give me back my persuader. You're soldiers, there's no point in you dying here. You can fight and die once you're on the battlefield!"

The boy took the persuader out of his mouth, flicked the safety back into place, and then wiped it with a cloth before handing it back to his master.

Then the boy said, "Yes sir. We'll fight and die. That's our duty as the soldiers of our country."

"That's right. Good job — No matter the circumstances, you must fight and die! Don't you forget it!"

"Yes sir!"

Finally, the tasteless demonstration was over.

Master Shizu and I sat quietly, drinking our tea, when Ti asked, "How do you make them?"

Maybe she was interested in the boys her age, maybe she noticed how apathetic Master Shizu was acting, or maybe both.

The officer was happy to answer (well, that was the whole reason he invited us in to talk, after all). "Good question, little lady — First, you have to catch them when they're fresh and young."

He spoke as if he was talking about raising fish.

"Our enemies' villages are down in the prairies, and they usually have lots of kids. In order to live there, they need big families to support the villages, you see. When a raid goes well, we kill all of the adults in the village and bring back any kids below 10."

He spoke quite easily about it, for something so dreadful. And the enemy country he was talking about was the one we had been to before this one, where we had heard about their harvesting villages.

"Then we groom them into child soldiers — back in the old days, I hear it was quite the struggle! We had to use brutal torture and brainwashing techniques, it was a lot of work on our part. They say lots of the kids died during their 'education' process too. Apparently capturing their parents alive and making the kids kill them was pretty effective."

The officer took a swig of tea to relieve his dry mouth, and then, reinvigorated, he went back to his story.

"But then all of our troubles were solved 40 years ago, by a wonderful new drug! It lets us wipe their old memories and plant fake ones!"

Yes, how wonderful. Of course, neither Master Shizu nor I said anything like that, but the officer happily continued. Ti and Master Shizu listened quietly.

"After taking that drug, their entire lives until then — their parents, the traditions of their homeland, the idea that hurting people is wrong — everything gets erased. Then you replace it with, 'I was born to fight for the country that raised me. I am an invincible soldier without fear.'"

Is that so?

"And so, the perfect child soldier is born! Fear, defiance, suspicion, they don't know any of it, so when their superior says, 'Charge!' they'll charge, no matter who or what shoots at them. If you tell them, 'Sweep the minefield!' they'll walk up and down the field and clear away the mines by stepping on them. Then we send in our real army afterwards, so our losses are wonderfully low!"

Well of course, when you don't count how many child soldiers you lose.

"As long as we make good use of them, our army has the upper hand. They're a vital tool for us." The officer finished his speech and turned to Ti. "Did that help answer your question, miss?" He didn't address Master Shizu, but then, it was clear on his face that he hadn't really been listening.

"Helped," Ti responded. Then she asked, "When does the drug wear off?"

I've thought this for a while, but Ti's thought process is a bit, no, very different from a normal person's, like mine or Master Shizu's, and you can never predict what she's going to say.

The officer looked at her blankly for a second, and then grinned wide, "You're pretty unique, aren't you, miss! That's the first time anyone's asked me that! Well then, let me tell you. In theory, they say that it wears off somewhere between 15 and 20. After that, they'll form new memories that will push out the existing ones, but you see —"

There's no way a child soldier would ever live that long.

"There's no way a child soldier would ever live that long. For all intents and

purposes, it's no problem at all."

"I see. That explains it. Now I understand everything."

Ti was talking an awful lot that day. I don't know what she meant by "that explains it" or "now I understand everything" though.

Master Shizu had stayed quiet this whole time, and still had some tea in his cup. He rose from his seat and said, "Thank you for the explanation. Please excuse us now."

"Why not stay for another cup?" the officer offered, and Master Shizu was trying to make it clear that he wasn't interested, when Ti spoke up.

"Actually, isn't it about time?"

That wasn't directed at Master Shizu, it was for the man in his sharp military uniform, sitting across the desk.

About time?

Between me, Master Shizu, and the officer, none of us knew what Ti was trying to get at.

The man the question was intended for spoke up, "What is it, miss?"

"It's about time."

"And that is? What is?"

"It should be about time for you."

"...Traveler, I don't know what this girl is saying, but is she a bit abnormal?"

No, she's very abnormal. However, it wasn't my place to say that, so I kept quiet.

Master Shizu lowered his arched back and said calmly, "She has a different point-of-view than most people, so sometimes, she'll say something that seems strange. If it bothered you, please allow me to apologize."

"It's fine, I'm not mad or anything," the officer grinned, seemingly unfazed. "I was just thinking she was a bit strange."

He looked at Ti, who was staring intently at him through her emerald green

eyes. "What's it 'about time' for? If you can put it into words, I'd love to know."

Just as I was giving up hope that she'd respond to the question, Ti said, "Same eyes."

Oh?

"Hohoh. Who has the same eyes as me?"

"Everyone."

"'Everyone?' What do you mean 'everyone'? Please tell me miss, which 'everyone' has the same eyes as me?"

"..." Ti was quiet for two seconds or so. It was an exceptionally short silence for her. And then she spoke for a miraculously long time.

"All of the child soldiers around here. They have the same eyes as you. Do you remember? The past, do you remember it? Can you clearly remember? Do you really remember? Well? What kind of kid were you? Do you remember? Do you really remember?"

—

It was like a demonic incantation.

—

For three seconds or so, the officer was frozen like ice.

For two seconds or so, he sucked in long, deep breaths.

"Eh? But I'm — I am — I was —"[\[1\]](#)

And then after four seconds, "GYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHH!" The man screamed.

Translator's Notes

1. [Jump up](#) ↑

For those of you familiar with Japanese pronouns, he switches from "jibun" to "ore" to "boku".

Author's Notes: "Menu" —Preface—

Appetizers & Vegetables

「Menu」
—Preface—

Vegetable Salad, Handpicked by Young Kino from the Forest

I like... eating wild ingredients wildly...

Bagna Càuda with Vegetables Picked from Master's Fields

From a small truckload of vegetables and a steel drum of dip.
How magnificent!

Carpaccio with Fish Caught from The Ship Country

The type of fish changes each day... but that's a good thing!

Volume 8 prologue/epilogue

Ti's Favorite Portable Rations

The choice of a true connoisseur! We have many repeat
customers that leave after having just this...

Volume 8 prologue/epilogue

Beef Jerky

Travelers' meat! Just take a bite and look...
the scenery unfolds before you...

Meat Dishes

Rabbit Stew Caught by Kino (with Vitamin Tablets)

It's just meat... but it's so good...

Volume 2, chapter 1

The Old Mechanical Doll Woman's Special: Steamed Chicken with Vegetables in Olive Oil Sauce

I am a robot... Please go ahead and eat, master...

Volume 3, chapter 4

Elephant Steak

Exotic meat, freshly killed this morning with a rocket launcher.

Volume 4, chapter 6

Whale Steak

Exotic meat, freshly killed this morning with a rocket launcher.

Volume 4, chapter 6

Potato, Onion, and Sausage Stir-fry

Exactly the way Kino makes it... Uhh... Are you actually going to eat it? Really?

Ham Steak in Blueberry Sauce

Just like Master makes it! Now you'll know why she wouldn't let Kino cook...

Fish Dishes

Fish Meunière That Shizu Somehow Managed to Catch

We'll eat as soon as I catch one, okay Riku...?

We'll each get half!

*Not available today

Soups

Vegetable Stew

We only use vegetables grown in the lowlands.

Volume 12, prologue/epilogue

Curr-flavored Macaroni Soup

This is the essence of outdoor cooking!

Good for you on a cold night...

Volume 15, chapter 1

Bread

Toast

Topped with plenty of special butter...

It's not for your hair, you know.

Volume 12, chapter 2

Croissant & Marmalade

Take the marmalade from the bottle and
spread it with a spoon. Then dig in.

Volume 10, chapter 6

Jam Bread

Made with lots of Mother and Toto's strawberry jam!

Made with lots of love!

Volume 2, chapter 6

Drinks

Tea

Kino's always drinking it...
This is the flavor of being on a journey...!

Cappuccino

Draw a picture you like.
What's your favorite picture?

Volume 13, frontispiece

Dokudami Tea

Oh don't worry, it's not poisoned.

Volume 1, chapter 1

Dessert

Special Choux Cream with Extra Cream


Eat it quick... before it's eaten by a protected animal!

Volume 10, chapter 3

Shaved Ice: Green Tea and Red Bean Flavored

I remember... eating this in the summer
together with that person...

November, 2011
Sigsawa Keiichi



HELLO. THIS IS KUROBOSHI.
AH. I JUST DREW THIS
WITHOUT THINKING ABOUT YOU
READERS THAT KEEP GOING
PAST THE AFTERWORD...
WHAT DO I DO... UHHHHH
THIS IS MAI DAUGHTERU.

...NOT REALLY.

KURO